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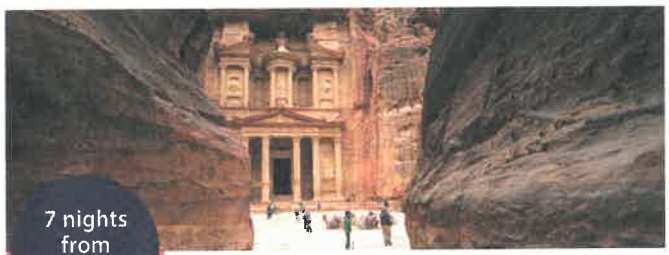

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SWISS ROLLERCOASTER

RISHI SUNAK put on his stern face at the CBI conference last week over reports that his government was looking at a Swiss-style relationship with the EU.

"Let me be unequivocal about this: under my leadership the United Kingdom will not pursue any relationship with the EU that relies on alignment with EU laws," he said. But the prime minister wasn't always so chary of Switzerland's approach to international trading arrangements.

As a thrusting young Brexiteer looking to get on the ministerial ladder in early 2017, he wrote how "Switzerland has signed FTAs [free trade agreements] with eight of Britain's largest 10 trading partners" and cited it as an exemplar of how "independent nations everywhere have a better record at managing trade policy". So Switzerland wasn't exactly being held back by its alignment with the EU where necessary.

By 2020, as a chancellor agreeing a financial services deal with the Swiss, Sunak was celebrating how "countries like the UK and Switzerland, who believe in that vision of an open, trading and cooperative world, continue to demonstrate… what we can achieve if we continue to work together".

At any hint of a rethink on the hard Brexit he championed, however, it appears the Swiss approach is just too open and cooperative for the British prime minister.

SINO THE TIMES

RISHI SUNAK's softening of his government's line on China at the G20 this month, hinting at reopening dialogue with Beijing and shifting the rhetoric from "threat" to "challenge", will be reassuring to those global businesses with significant interests in the country.

These include, er, the Indian IT business Infosys, in which his wife Akshata Murty happens to own a £750m or so stake.

Infosys has eight offices across China and counts itself among the "key liaison outsourcing service companies" for the People's Republic's ministry of commerce. It also boasts partnerships with major Chinese digital companies such as Tencent, plus an innovation centre in Shanghai and – with further operations across the US and Europe – will surely welcome the prospect of greater Sino-western commercial cooperation.

Despite his responsibilities as chancellor and now prime minister, Sunak omits to declare his wife's large holding in such a company in his official list of interests.

MONE ALONE?

REVELATIONS from the *Guardian* about Tory peer Baroness Bra, aka Michelle Mone, and her family receiving millions from supplying less than useful personal protective equipment through offshore-controlled PPE Medpro might finally prompt action on Covid profiteering. If so, investigators might like to examine some of the other trousering – often at levels exceeding even Mone's – exposed by the *Eye*.

Issue 1560's *Profits of Doom* special report from November 2021 (*see www.private-eye.co.uk/special-reports*) would make a good start for further reading. Of Medpro, for example, it noted: "It is clear that large amounts of public money have been funnelled into intentionally opaque corporate structures that hide their beneficiaries."

Politicians have been particularly slow to react to these scandals. Making her maiden speech to the Lords in 2016, the lingerie tycoon promised the upper house she would be a regular attender. "I look forward to playing a full and active role in your lordships' house," averred the "wee girl from a tenement flat in the East End of Glasgow". The Tory peer has since made just four more contributions in the chamber, the most recent being more than two years ago. Yet MPs were told they could not criticise Mone's reported pocketing of £29m from a government Covid contract because parliamentary rules forbid criticism of peers. Really?

NUMBER CRUNCHING

9% Proposed pay rise for Royal Mail workers over two years, prompting strikes and accusation from company of 'holding Christmas to ransom'

27% Latest bonus for Royal Mail chief executive Simon Thompson, worth £142,000, despite seriously missing service targets

FARAGE & NO FORTUNE

FINANCIAL news powerhouse Bloomberg last week caught up with *Private Eye* (In the City, issue 1567) in examining Nigel Farage's new gig as a share tipster in his subscription-only *Fortune & Freedom* online newsletter.

It found that the Farage UK Independent Wealth portfolio had substantially underperformed the FTSE100 and All Share indices since it started almost two years ago, with 11 of the 16 tips down since they were recommended. What a surprise!

In fact, Bloomberg calculates that anyone following Farage's *Fortune & Freedom* investment tips would be 7 percent worse off after two years. Still, that's not as bad as the 15 percent by which the Office for Budget Responsibility calculates Britain's "trade intensity" is worse after Brexit. Thanks Nige!

● *Plans for Nigel, p8*

TORY BARONESS IN PPE SCANDAL

DEARTH ON THE NILE…

AT COP27 in Egypt there was no progress whatever on reducing CO_2 emissions, *writes Old Sparky*; indeed many assess there was backsliding from positions reached last year (*Eye* 1561). The only achievement was an agreement to establish (at some point) a "damage and loss fund" for developing nations suffering from climate change.

The host nation allowed largescale lobbying by oil and gas producers – 636 representatives were given access – leading to a final communique seemingly crafted for Egypt and others who hold major gas reserves that can handily substitute for Putin's gas in Europe, and more widely for coal. Given that next year's COP28 will be in the UAE, another gas producer, the current dash-for-gas bandwagon may well accelerate.

Political realism in energy-strapped Europe also favours gas. Last week, Welsh first minister Mark Drakeford gave interviews lauding the role of expanded liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals at Milford Haven, importing vast quantities of gas from, er, Qatar. Does COP27 mark the transition away from attempting to halt climate change, towards accepting it as inevitable?

● *Keeping the lights on, p8*

A RIGHT PICKLE

ELON MUSK maintains he is "neither conventionally right nor left" – yet since buying Twitter he has spent much of his time on the platform parroting debunked right-wing talking points.

"It is objectively the case," he tweeted last week, "that 'conservative' political candidates were more negatively affected [by algorithmic bias at Twitter] than 'progressive' candidates." However, a number of independent, peer-reviewed academic studies on the subject, along with Twitter's own internal analyses from 2021, show that right-wing content has traditionally performed significantly *better* on the platform (see *Eye* 1572).

Perhaps Musk's confusion is a result of spending a considerable proportion of his time on Twitter interacting with various right-wing, occasionally fascist-adjacent accounts, with whom he apparently agrees that "the woke mind virus has thoroughly penetrated entertainment and is pushing civilization towards suicide". His vision of Twitter becoming a "trusted digital town square" seems more of a pipe dream than ever.

● *Anti-Social Media, p20*

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NEWS

WAGERS OF SIN

FOR a country where gambling is illegal, Qatar is managing to stage a gigantic global betting extravaganza. Industry experts believe this World Cup will smash the record of £118bn in bets from across the planet which were placed on the previous tournament in 2018.

This target will be reached in part thanks to the legalisation of gambling in many US states since the last World Cup in Russia in 2018. The US move opened up a lucrative new market for the bookies and the convenient scheduling of England-USA on Black Friday, when many Americans were off work for Thanksgiving, was a further boost. Technological advances in the past four years also make placing a sports bet easier than ever.

Interestingly, Fifa has never been much enamoured of gambling operators as sponsors, presumably because it has so many gazillions from the likes of Coca-Cola and Budweiser. The Qatar World Cup only has one betting partner, a Greek bookie called Betano, announced belatedly as a "third tier" sponsorship deal.

Fifa's lack of interest in the gambling industry stands in marked contrast to the Premier League, where matches are awash with the logos of bookies and casinos on perimeter advertising boards as well as players' shirts. On the opening weekend of this season, for example, logos for 15 different betting brands were on display across the 10 matches.

Campaigners have long called for a crackdown on betmakers sponsoring shirt logos and perimeter advertising, to help address problem gambling. But their proposals have been fiercely resisted by the UK football industry on economic grounds.

The fact Fifa managed to rake in £1.2bn of revenue from marketing this year with only one low-tier deal with a gambling operator might be of interest to the UK government as it concludes its long-delayed review into gambling legislation.

SQUAD GOALS

WHILE Harry Kane was reporting a dodgy ankle, the man often touted as his replacement as England's star striker has been left out of the World Cup over… gambling issues!

The Football Association has charged Brentford striker Ivan Toney with breaking FA betting rules on 232 occasions between 2017 and 2021. Following a leak of the FA's betting investigation – published in the Sun on Sunday four days before the squad announcement – Toney was left out. The FA denied the probe had any bearing on manager Gareth Southgate's decision, but it certainly helped dampen criticism of his choice of Newcastle's Callum Wilson instead.

Toney instructed lawyers to make the Sun on Sunday pull the story on the grounds that it would "have an unwarranted, unfair and adverse impact upon our client's prospects of being selected for the squad". After the legal move failed, Toney said in a statement: "I am a proud Englishman and it has always been my childhood dream to play for my country at a World Cup."

That pride will now be put to the test. Only last year, the Jamaican Football Federation offered Toney (who qualifies through his mother) the chance to represent them, which he turned down in the hope of playing for England. That was a career gamble by a player who – the FA investigation would suggest – is no stranger to high-stakes calls.

KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON

On the bright side...

SIGNIFICANT news on National Grid's experimental scheme for energy users to switch off during a set hour in return for money (see last *Eye*).

Hundreds of thousands of customers are taking part via their energy suppliers; and in the first hour's trial, the increase in spare generating capacity available to the grid was meaningful. Payments to customers ranged from under £1 to more than £4. As far as it goes, this result is genuinely encouraging: but can it be replicated at scale, all winter? There are factors pointing in different directions.

On the plus side, we now know that in the right circumstances enough customers are willing to play the game *en masse*, and the systems seem to work (let's see if they all get the promised credits on their bills). And the grid could in theory afford to pay double what it did this time per unit of electricity saved, albeit the "theory" in question is "value of lost load", quantification of which is dubious (*Eyes* passim).

Less optimistically, people taking part in such experiments are among those most keen on them – an enthusiasm unlikely to be shared across the population. And credits of a pound or two, perhaps just once or twice a day on very cold days, may not be enough of an incentive when the novelty wears off.

Still, credit where it's due: it's hard to see how this first largescale experiment could have gone much better. If it can be scaled up, at the relatively miserly level of payments made this time, on a reliable basis and without boredom causing drop-outs, it could be an important new tool in the grid's armoury for keeping the lights on.

BULB, the largest of the 50 or so energy suppliers to go bust, was nationalised last year, being too big for the regulator's usual fall-back of getting another supplier to swallow it. By March this was estimated to be costing the public (whether as energy bill payers or taxpayers was not clear) around £2bn. That's now estimated at £6.5bn. How come?

Culpably, the government failed to do what the firm itself failed to do: "hedge" Bulb's exposure to rising wholesale prices by buying sufficient energy forward at fixed prices to cover the needs of its customers, whom they can only charge a maximum of the capped price however high non-fixed wholesale energy prices rise. Those variable wholesale energy prices duly went through the roof after Bulb was taken over.

The then business secretary Kwasi Kwarteng was the minister responsible at the time. His three reasons for not hedging Bulb's risks are pure blather. Firstly, we were told that Treasury rules don't allow publicly owned entities to hedge. This, in technical parlance, is "bollocks": many public bodies hedge all the time. Then, he said the government as a whole is "naturally hedged" because tax receipts from North Sea oil and gas producers also go up with wholesale prices. The technical term for this fallacy is more complicated: it's called "basis risk" in finance jargon. Anyhow, those tax receipts are already spoken for, covering part of the new "energy price guarantee" – hence the rise in the cost of Bulb to us all.

Most shockingly, Kwarteng declared that "hedging is risky". So why was Bulb castigated by all concerned for *not* hedging? The very definition of hedging is that it cancels out the risk of exposure to variable wholesale prices: financial regulators insist on it all the time. That ministers believe such nonsense as Kwarteng's is frightening. But it is they who are now "selling" Bulb to another supplier – on secret financial terms. What other Bulb-related horrors await us?

'Old Sparky'

PLANS FOR NIGEL

"NIGEL FARAGE is eyeing up a sensational return to frontline politics after No 10 was forced to deny plotting to sign up for a Swiss-style relationship with the EU."

So squealed the *Express* excitedly last week following the great Brexit Mr Toad's utterance on social media that "if they really do betray Brexit, I would have to do something." Ooh!

This sounds like the real deal. In October, speaking to the Bitcoin Conference in Amsterdam, Farage – formerly a politician, now a broadcaster on GB News and gin-and-cryptocurrency salesman – revealed that if the UK political system changed to a more proportional model, "I might even give it another go myself." Cue a headline about Farage dropping the "biggest hint yet" that he was going to return to politics.

Mad Hater

Perhaps, though, it was just a nod to the anniversary of his previous threat to come back: "Over the last few weeks, I have been approached by several high-ranking donors asking me if I am considering getting back into the political arena. My gut instinct is not to do so, but I will have to give it some serious thought," he bloviated in the *Telegraph* in November 2021, taking time out from his busy schedule flogging gold and recording videos for Cameo. And did he? Well, not yet.

For reference, there were just *eight months* between Farage resigning as leader of Reform UK (formerly the Brexit Party) in 2021 and his next threat to darken Britain's voting booths once more. This is slightly more than the four-month pause between his 2016 resignation as Ukip leader and the first time he reneged on that deal. For Nige, Leave clearly doesn't mean Leave!

JUST FANCY THAT!

"Anything along those lines would be a betrayal of Brexit…" – ***Brexiteer Nigel Farage responds to reports that the government might move to a Swiss-style arrangement with the EU, 21 November 2022***

"Wouldn't it be terrible if we were like Norway or Switzerland? Really? They're rich. They're happy. They're self-governing." – ***Farage mocks those claiming the UK would be worse off outside the EU, 17 January 2013***

GOING FOR A STEEL

PRESSURE is mounting on Tees Valley mayor Ben Houchen's regeneration of Teesside via his South Tees Development Corporation and the area's designation as the government's flagship freeport, scene of many a ministerial publicity stunt.

Some disgruntled locals used last week's demolition of the landmark Redcar blast furnace to remind Houchen of the promise he made before he was re-elected in 2021, six years after steelmaking shut down on the Tees. "This is my promise to the people of the Tees Valley… I'll restore our rightful place as a global leader in the steel industry." This was typical Houchen bluster, far beyond his capability to deliver.

Now the plan is for a green industrial future. As *Eye* readers will know, however, control of the development has been handed to local property developers, who have already extracted tens of millions of pounds from selling materials on the site while delivering very little. The businessmen were gifted a 90 percent stake in the Teesworks Ltd joint venture with the development corporation that now effectively controls the site.

In a recent Commons debate, Middlesborough MP Andy McDonald summed up the controversy. "Vast sums of public money – some £375m – have been expended on acquiring and remediating the land on the south bank of the Tees," he told MPs. But when it came to handing responsibility to the joint venture, "there was no procurement or tendering process whatsoever". Shares in Teesworks Ltd "have been transferred for nothing. For nil. For zero. For zip." There was "a total absence" of proper scrutiny and "a distinct lack of accountability".

He went on: "*Private Eye* has been leading with its detailed and thorough examination… It comes to something when we have to rely on a satirical magazine to undertake forensic examination of how public money is spent…"

As the MP noted, however, such efforts are frustrated by freedom of information requests being "met with resistance and obfuscation". Major contractual arrangements and payments remain hidden. Neighbouring Stockton North MP Alex Cunningham echoed McDonald and called for a "full inquiry" into the joint venture.

For the government, junior business minister Kevin Hollinrake did not respond to that call.

PS: On 11 November, Teesworks Ltd tweeted a solemn photograph of workers on the site removing their hard hats for a two-minute silence. Behind them were two large diggers, arms suitably lowered, emblazoned with the logo of TCC Plant. This happens to be the plant hire company created in 2020 by the twentysomething son and son-in-law of Martin Corney, one of the two main developers given the Teesworks shares, just as Dad was negotiating the joint venture. Lest we forget.

TAKING THE BISCUIT

WHEN Crawford Falconer was brought in from the free-market Legatum Institute as the UK's top post-Brexit international trade negotiator five years ago, the then international trade secretary Liam Fox billed him as "the best of global talent" and handed him one of the highest civil service pay deals (£265,000 salary last year). Near the top of the Kiwi's to-do list was a deal with Australia.

This was duly signed in December last year but was so bad even George Eustice, the agriculture secretary, who had a big hand in it, this month said it was no good. Hardly a negotiating triumph, so a setback for the chief negotiator, surely? Not a bit of it: Falconer was swiftly handed a rare 2021/22 civil service performance bonus of £15,000 to £20,000 on top of his regular wedge. Another great deal for taxpayers!

● *See The Brexiteers, p13*

PANDEMIC UPDATE: MD ON SHOT LUCK

THE death of 14-year-old Irish boy Joseph McGinty, three weeks after his Pfizer Covid 19 vaccine, has led Co Mayo coroner Pat O'Connor to declare the issue of "significant public concern" with an inquest requiring "considerable investigation into the vaccine, the effects of the vaccine and also the effects of the vaccine on Master McGinty". The case could take "months or possibly years to conclude its findings", according to O'Connor.

It's extremely difficult to prove cause and effect in medicine, which is why health scares rumble on for years and it's hard to sue drug companies successfully. What is known is that there is no such thing as zero risk, benefits have to be balanced against harms and unknowns, and all drugs cause rare, unlucky side effects. Indeed, penicillin and aspirin are as likely to kill the unfortunate few as any vaccine. Equally, deaths may be attributed to a drug or vaccine when they have no causal link at all.

It's also true that drug companies have a chequered history of refusing to reveal all their data in real time and covering up harm, and if coroner O'Connor can get Pfizer to fully cooperate with his inquest he will be doing us all a favour.

Meanwhile, the social media war rages on between those who believe all unexplained cardiac deaths are down to the uncontrolled spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus, and those who believe they are down to the vaccines. There are those who believe Covid is never mild, is far more likely to cause heart and brain inflammation than any vaccine and that vaccination should be extended to children of all ages. And there are those who believe all vaccination should be suspended immediately pending an urgent safety inquiry and full disclosure of data by the manufacturers.

However, with huge profits at stake and vested interests on both sides of the argument, it can be hard to unearth sensible, evidence-led advice. Step forward Denmark, which in MD's view has the balance about right:

"The Danish Health Authority expects that the number of covid-19 infections will increase during autumn and winter. Therefore, we recommend (booster) vaccination of people aged 50 years and over as well as selected risk groups.

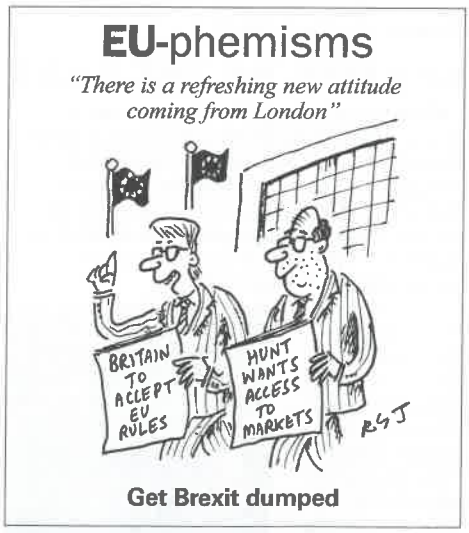
The purpose of the vaccination programme is to prevent severe illness, hospitalisation and death. Therefore, people at the highest risk of becoming severely ill will be offered booster vaccination. The purpose of vaccination is not to prevent infection with Covid-19, and people aged under 50 are therefore currently not being offered booster vaccination.

People aged under 50 are generally not at particularly higher risk of becoming severely ill from Covid-19. In addition, younger people aged under 50 are well protected against becoming severely ill from Covid-19, as a very large number of them have already been vaccinated and have previously been infected with Covid-19, and there is consequently good immunity among this part of the population.

Children and adolescents rarely become severely ill from the Omicron variant of Covid-19. From 1 July 2022, it was no longer possible for children and adolescents aged under 18 to get the first injection and, from 1 September 2022, it was no longer possible for them to get the second injection. A very limited number of children at particularly higher risk of becoming severely ill will still be offered vaccination based on an individual assessment by a doctor."

The Danes have stopped vaccinating healthy children and the low risk under-50s not just because their risk from Omicron is lower (but not negligible), but because a pan-Nordic observational study did confirm an association between mRNA vaccines and myocarditis, in particular after the second dose, and this was strongest in younger males. However, it was rare, tended to resolve and did not lead to excess deaths in the period studied.

The UK Covid booster vaccine programme is nearly identical to the Danish one, with very similar guidance, although healthy under-50s are being offered a (voluntary) booster if they work in health and social care. However, the Danes are using variant-updated mRNA vaccines, whereas the UK is using a mix of non-updated and updated vaccines. It is pot luck which one you get and, unlike the flu vaccine, you can't pay privately to get the vaccine you want.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BANKS STATEMENT

AMID economic pain for most there was good news for Britain's banks in chancellor Jeremy Hunt's autumn statement.

Banks have paid an additional corporation tax, aka a surcharge, ever since the financial crisis to reflect the sector's reliance on taxpayer backing. Last year, former chancellor Rishi Sunak (*who he? Ed.*) announced the surcharge would fall from 8 percent to 3 percent as of next April. But then came the small matter of an energy crisis and the need for drastic tax increases. With their profits growing, banks faced a reversal of the surcharge cut and possibly even a new windfall tax.

Cue some desperate lobbying. Leading this was Rishi Khosla, boss and co-founder of "challenger" bank OakNorth, who has both given to the Tory party and hosted policy "advisory board" meetings at his Kensington home. Tax rises would, Khosla told the *Sunday Times* soon after Hunt took over at the Treasury, make UK banks "internationally uncompetitive".

The grumbling seems to have worked, as Hunt stuck with the surcharge reduction and rejected windfall taxes. All of which saves Khosla a fair few bob. Last year OakNorth's profits rose by 73 percent to £135m. Should help him deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

Street Of Shame

THE DEVIL FINDS WORK...

WHAT was the purpose of the "business meeting" in Montana between Boris Johnson and Rupert Murdoch on 11 October, the existence of which was revealed in the former prime minister's register of financial interests a month later?

It must have been something important for the Doddery Digger to have shelled out £11,559.84 to cover Johnson's "internal US air travel, accommodation and hospitality for me and two members of staff".

There is nothing unusual in Johnson expecting someone else to pick up his bills, but Murdoch is not always so generous. Although he shelled out for former PM Tony Blair's notorious round-the-world-and-back trip to Hayman Island in Australia in 1995, when David Cameron, as leader of the opposition, made the much shorter journey to Santorini to pay homage to the media mogul in 2008, the Digger got his then son-in-law Matthew Freud to stump up for the tickets.

Johnson's matey meeting is even odder given that a mere fortnight later it was made clear to him that Murdoch's *Sun* would actively oppose a bid for the Conservative leadership, and indeed regarded it as "a terrible mistake" – a major factor in Johnson's late-night decision to pull out of the race.

But perhaps it isn't so odd. When Johnson booted then levelling-up secretary Michael Gove out of the cabinet in the summer, Murdoch lost no time in re-absorbing him into the News UK empire, sounding Gove out about editing the paper he used to work on, the *Times*, and announcing him as a new presenter on Times Radio. That gig, however, was swiftly stymied by the implosion of Liz Truss's government and Gove's return to cabinet.

Johnson, meanwhile, has so far failed to make his expected return to his old berth at the *Telegraph*, which used to pay him £275,000 a year for a weekly column – a sum he described as "chickenfeed", and by coincidence, the same amount he was able to pull in recently for a single speaking engagement in Washington DC.

Last year Murdoch signed the notorious £50m deal with Piers Moron which tied him to columns in the *Sun* and *New York Post* and a book deal with HarperCollins, as well as the TV show which goes out to an audience of dozens on Murdoch outlets in the UK, America and Australia. Might Murdoch now be thinking of throwing good money after bad by hiring a cross-media star who has the additional advantages of Americans actually liking him and people being interested in what he has to say?

MERMAIDS' TALE

AT THE beginning of November, we revealed details of the scorching resignation letter that *Guardian* journalist Hadley Freeman had sent to her editor Kath Viner (*Eye* 1585). Among her reasons for quitting was that in recent years "I have repeatedly suggested to multiple section editors" that they commission an investigation into the trans children's charity Mermaids, "but to no avail, either because of the editors' ideological beliefs or – more likely – their fear of the reaction in the office."

Two weeks later, on 17 November, the *Guardian* published an exceedingly carefully balanced piece by legal affairs correspondent

Haroon Siddique headlined "Mermaids: why has the trans charity been in the news?" As far as *Guardian* readers were concerned, and as Freeman had pointed out, it hadn't!

Has this been enough to stop the civil war raging over the topic at the *Guardian* and *Observer*? Have a guess!

Claim and counter-claim of bullying and hate speech sail back and forth on a special whistleblower hotline set up by management. A team of psychologists commissioned to conduct interviews with staff have been witnessed emerging from meeting rooms looking shell-shocked. And ahead of the unveiling of an updated style guide which will lock in the official Newspeak to be used at all times, members of staff have taken to accessing pre-publication copy by suspect colleagues in order to check for possible thoughtcrimes.

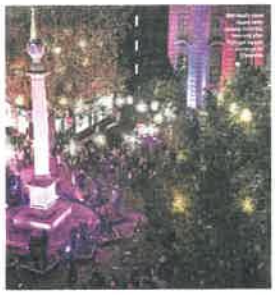
With Viner referring internal correspondence on such matters to the HR department rather than taking an editorial line, matters have not been helped by her predecessor, Alan Rusbridger, choosing to give the pot a good stir.

In the October edition of *Prospect*, the magazine Rubbisher now edits, *Observer* architecture correspondent Rowan Moore was commissioned to pen an essay on "How to have a fair discussion about transgender rights." After studying sensationalist reports in the *Telegraph* and *Mail*, Moore went on to "take issue with my own newspaper, the *Observer*", where "overall coverage of trans issues is, I believe, unbalanced" – and specifically criticised two articles by unnamed, but easily identifiable colleagues.

Those who asked if this was in the spirit of Viner's instructions that staff should not "air internal disputes with colleagues or contributors" in public (*Eye* 1552) were informed that Moore was a freelancer, and could therefore do what he liked.

BONFIRE OF THE SUBS

TRAFALGAR SQUARE in its festive finery must be one of the most famous sights in London, with a giant Norwegian tree alongside Nelson's column and the National Gallery in the background. So how did the capital's own evening newspaper manage to confuse it with... the small roundabout at Seven Dials in Covent Garden?



The *Evening Standard* illustrated a gloomy economic news item on 18 November with photos captioned: "Not much cheer round here: Jeremy Hunt this morning after Trafalgar Square was lit up for Christmas." Alas, the picture of Christmas lights showed revellers at the Seven Dials Winter Warm-Up gathered around the clock – a much, much smaller column than Nelson's, which is a ten-minute walk away.

INDY MIRE

GRIM TIMES at the *Independent*, where hacks were told last month that "certain roles" would be cut as the result of an "extremely challenging economic climate". Most staff, that is: the US, politics and climate teams were accidentally left in the waiting room for the virtual meeting outlining the plans, meaning a rerun was required to tell them they might be up for the chop.

What a difference a year makes! In October 2021 the online-only *Indy* was celebrating a bumper financial year, with the business's annual profits doubling to £5.48m. And the picture still seemed rosy just over six months ago if managing director – and former editor – Christian Broughton was to be believed.

At a town hall meeting for staff in late April, he boasted about how much money the paper was making, leaving journalists perplexed at the intermittent hiring freezes, lack of commissioning budget and infamously low wages (reporters earn £110 per day, well below competitors' rates).

Now, however, things have gone from bad to worse: staff were told last week that no fewer than 30 roles will be cut from the already-tight team, including eight of the nine casual sub-editors, and that a number of them will be competing with each other for the jobs that are left. The political editor, deputy political editor and Whitehall editor will all go up against each other for the single role of politics and Whitehall editor, and the climate and environment correspondents will similarly have to duke it out for one combined job. The role of international editor, meanwhile, will be done away with altogether, in favour of a new post of, er, assistant editor, international – although exactly who they will be assisting remains a mystery.

But then perhaps anything can happen at a paper that doesn't even have an editor. Two years after Broughton ascended to his management role David Marley remains merely the *Independent*'s acting editor – just as at sister Lebedev paper the *Evening Standard*, no one has been announced as official successor to Emily Sheffield, who departed more than a year ago.

TIMES A'CHANGING

ALL change at the *Times* and *Sunday Times* as staff await the imminent announcement that *ST* editor Emma Tucker will take over at the *Wall Street Journal* and her deputy Ben Taylor will take her place.

This, managers hope, will ensure greater alignment between the two titles. *Times* editor Tony Gallagher and Taylor are old colleagues from the *Daily Mail*, while Gallagher and Tucker are... not so close.

Gallagher's first big signing since becoming *Times* editor in September has been to hire Martin Samuel, another old colleague from the *Mail*. Samuel has been chief sportswriter for the latter since he moved in the other direction on a big-money deal in 2008, and his arrival should be interesting given the *Times* already has a chief sportswriter, Owen Slot, as well as a chief football correspondent, Henry Winter (Samuel mostly writes about football).

It will also put a dent in company finances. Samuel was on £400,000 a year at the *Mail* with an expenses account that would have looked lavish even in the old days of Fleet Street (business class flights; five star accommodation; no limit on restaurant bills). And this comes at a time when the *Times* and *Sunday Times* have to make at least £1m worth of savings by the end of their financial year in June. Usually this would be handled by managing editor Craig Tregurtha. But he has already saved the company some cash by taking redundancy last month!

MYSTIC MOGG AWARD

THE Bitcoin crash this year – from a high of $61,000 last autumn to under $19,000 in June, wiping two-thirds from its value – may have worried some investors as cryptocurrency assets swirled around the plughole, but not hack and arch-prognosticator Matthew Lynn of the *Spectator*, *Telegraph* and elsewhere.

"Since the middle of June, Bitcoin has clawed its way to almost $25,000," Lynn reassured *Spectator* readers in August. "Ethereum has doubled in value during the last month… the list goes on." The recovery "should run for several months. This is what makes cryptocurrency different from typical investment mania." Boom and bust were natural, so even if the currencies were doing worse by the time his article was printed, "each time around, the peak has always ended up higher".

So has Bitcoin continued to recover, as Lynn expected? Er, no. By November it had lost yet more value, at $16,500. And was Lynn, who in 2007 declared the newly launched iPhone nothing more than "a luxury bauble that will appeal to a few gadget freaks", willing to admit he was wrong? Er, not so much. As he told *Telegraph* readers in mid-November, even though "huge falls" might yet follow, "perhaps the cryptos can simply trade their way through this crisis… The FTX scandal may one day prove to be the making of Bitcoin – and not its end."

Perhaps Lynn is too modest to admit he called it right years ago. In 2018, when the currency last crashed, he predicted "the bubble is finally bursting, leaving a trail of gullible fools to nurse their losses… Bitcoin will never be the one thing it is actually meant to be – a digital currency." Make your mind up, Matt!

MISSING LINK

MUSING on the allure of business fraudsters, *Times* columnist David Aaronovitch cites the example of Elizabeth Holmes, founder of Theranos, whose revolutionary health diagnostic kit turned out to be a giant scam.

"Great personages such as Henry Kissinger and George Shultz adorned the Theranos board," he wrote. "Magazines carried Holmes's winning picture on their front covers. Medical schools honoured her, politicians and celebrities were photographed alongside her. But secretly, in the sequestered patent-defending laboratory in the Theranos HQ, the people working on the project knew that the tech simply didn't work. A gap was opening up between what potential (and still vital) investors were being told and what was true. And to plug that gap, lies began to be told… It was a fraud."

A fraud indeed, and one now rewarded with an 11-year prison sentence. But Aaronovitch could have mentioned (but chose not to) another great personage closer to home who was also suckered by Holmes, to the extent of investing an eye-watering £125m: step forward *Times* proprietor R. Murdoch!

FOR EVERY PROBLEM, A SOLUTION

"Tuesday 15 November marks the day that the global population is projected to reach 8bn, according to the United Nations – meaning the number of people in the world has more than tripled in the past 70 years. The impact of this is far-reaching, putting additional pressure on already stretched resources and challenging efforts to reduce poverty and inequality." **– Guardian, *15 November***

"Humans could face a reproductive crisis if action is not taken to tackle a drop in sperm count, researchers have warned after finding the rate of decline is accelerating." **– Guardian, *15 November***

THEY SAID IT…

DAILY EXPRESS

ONLY HERE FOR THE CHEERS… Qatar bans sale of beer at stadiums

FREE £5 BET IN SHOP AT

Zara's killer should have been in jail before attack

IT GETS WORSE!

Daily Express, *19 November*

NO SECRET, SANTA

LORD LEBEDEV is back! Britain's beardiest newspaper magnate returned to the pages of his *Evening Standard* last week to launch the paper's Christmas appeal – featuring a large front-page photograph of himself giving out food parcels, naturally.

"The cost-of-living crisis will affect all Londoners – but it will not be felt equally," decreed Baron Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia. "Ordinary people are having to make agonising choices reminiscent of Dickensian times – whether to heat or eat, endure chronic toothache or repair the washing machine, sit in the dark or buy the children a treat." Missing from the coverage was any speculation on what might have brought such a crisis about after 12 solid years of Conservative government. Why so?

In 2012 Lebedev replaced editor Geordie Greig with craven Boris Johnson-booster Sarah Sands, who, since stepping down, has taken roles at Conservative thinktank Bright Blue and advised current prime minister Rishi Sunak's wife on media strategy.

Her successor from 2017-20 was George Osborne, previously chancellor for six miserable years of Tory austerity. He was followed by Emily Sheffield, who as sister-in-law of former PM David Cameron was not entirely unplugged from Tory circles. And finally, of course, there's Johnson himself, whose eight years as mayor of London and three as Conservative prime minister must qualify him for some responsibility for the state of the capital.

Lebedev gave Johnson several free holidays over the past decade plus fawning coverage in his paper; Johnson returned the favour with a seat in the Lords. Alas, if only Lebedev had the ear of anyone in government instead of having to rely on charity to solve Londoners' problems!

"WANT to get ahead in business? Be like a woman," advised the *Telegraph* on 22 November. The piece, by Eleanor Mills and Flora Bowen, explained through the stories of various influential women that the "soft skills" of empathy, sympathy and collaboration could make the world of work a better place.

One of those interviewed was food writer and entrepreneur Ella Mills, aka Deliciously Ella, who explained that "it takes bravery to be vulnerable… but ultimately this is what endears us to each other as humans… Teamwork is everything."

Isn't it just! For Ella Mills just happens to be the sister-in-law of… Eleanor Mills, co-writer of the feature and former editorial director of the *Sunday Times*, where the Deliciously Ella brand has received regular plugs (*Eyes passim*). The sisterhood are literally looking out for each other!

SEVERAL papers had fun with the story of Brad Lawlor, a London barrister who mistakenly turned up for a trial in Newport, south Wales, rather than Newport on the Isle of Wight.

Among them was the *Express*, which chortled over the lawyer's geographical ignorance – directly beneath a standfirst referring to "the Isle of White".

ROYAL SAUCE

QUITE a scoop for the *Daily Mail* in its serialisation of Gyles Brandreth's quick-turn around cash-in (*surely "heartfelt personal tribute"? Ed.*) *Elizabeth: An Intimate Portrait* last weekend, especially after months of speculation about what precisely killed the late Queen: that he "had heard" she had been suffering from bone marrow cancer.

You would, however, have had to look quite hard for the news in Saturday's paper. It was not one of the newsworthy points flagged on page 5. And in the extracts from the book itself, the cancer revelation was buried in paragraph 23.

The *Sun*, scrabbling to catch up in its second edition, did manage to feature the news on its front page – but even then it buried the lead, deeming the possible cause of the monarch's death less important than the news that Brenda, er, "watched *Line of Duty*". Why so?

One reason is that the papers are very wary of upsetting the palace on such matters. One of the rare occasions that the royal press office wielded a stick rather than the usual carrots was when the *Evening Standard* reported in 2008 that the Duke of Edinburgh had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, declaring it "a serious breach of Prince Philip's privacy" and calling in the Press Complaints Commission to negotiate a swift and grovelling apology. The other is that they suspect it is, to use a technical term, bollocks.

For all his claims of intimacy, Brandreth is not one of the three or four close aides outside the family who know the true cause of Her Majesty's death. If he had been fed that line by one of them, and it was accurate, it would be regarded as a terrible act of betrayal and his "sources" would be ostracising him. But instead he'll no doubt be back with another "intimate" tome in the not too distant future.

LORD FUCK OF BOLLOCKS

"SIR Keir Starmer has reportedly told Labour peers he would abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a second elected chamber to 'restore trust in politics' and prevent governments from handing peerages to 'lackeys and donors'," explained a *Mail*Online article on 19 November.

It noted that "Labour have accused Boris Johnson of simply handing peerages to his supporters," detailing that the former PM's lavender list "is set to include ultra-loyalist MPs Nadine Dorries and Nigel Adams, as well as advisers Ross Kempsell and Charlotte Owen."

Oddly, *Mail*Online forgot to mention another even more controversial Johnson "lackey" who is also rumoured to be handed a peerage later this year… the current editor-in-chief of *Mail*Online's parent company, DMG Media, Mr (for now) Paul Dacre!

MIRROR CRACKED

"Our article headlined 'Couple "have to feed their 5 kids nothing but ready meals" due to "nightmare" crisis' published on 1 July 2022 reported that Nicola and Kevin Gomersall were feeding their children 'nothing but ready meals' due to rising food prices and suggested that their children played computer games consoles 'as' they were off school. However, this was incorrect and misrepresented the couple's comments to the newspaper. The couple did not solely feed their children ready meals. Further, our substitution of 'as' for 'when' in the article wrongly suggested that the couple's children were not in school when they otherwise should have been." **– *Correction published online by the* Daily Mirror *on 4 November, after assuring press watchdog Ipso that the article "was an accurate report of the interview"***

More Street of Shame over ☞

FIFA FOE

"NO MORE virtue-signalling talk," declared a *Sun* editorial on the morning of England's first match in Doha, declaring that it was time to stop worrying about petty issues like human rights and just enjoy the football.

But it seems not all *Sun* hacks got the memo: directly adjacent was the regular Monday column of political commentator Trevor Kavanagh, in which he derided Fifa boss Gianni Infantino for his bizarre claims to self-identify with persecuted minorities. "This delusion qualifies him to defend the homophobic, misogynistic, racist but oil-rich Arab state of Qatar, where Fifa is inexplicably staging this year's World Cup," Kavanagh snorted. "If any apologies are due, Infantino could make a start on behalf of millions of gay, disabled, African, Qatari or Arab folk whose name and cause he so outrageously hijacked."

Is this woke warrior in any way related to the Trevor Kavanagh who was appointed as *Sun* political editor in the gory days of Kelvin MacKenzie's editorship and who described himself as "the fig-leaf for page 3"? The Trevor Kavanagh who was rebuked by press watchdog Ipso as recently as 2017 for inaccurate claims about migrants "elbowing their way to the front of the queue" and remarks about a Muslim newsreader wearing the hijab? Or the Trevor Kavanagh who penned the notorious *Sun* front page in 1998 demanding to know "Is Britain being run by a gay Mafia of politicians, lawyers, Palace courtiers and TV bigwigs?… The public has a right to know how many homosexuals occupy positions of high power… We have a right to know about secret liaisons which might explain why certain policies are persistently pursued." Er, yes. But pointing that out now would be most unsportsmanlike.

OVER THE RAINBOW

"THE tiny rainbow flag was nothing more than a pathetic stunt to assuage the guilt of the right-on players for agreeing to be part of a tournament in Qatar," declared *Mail*Online columnist and GB News presenter Dan Wootton on 21 November after the England and Wales teams backed out of wearing armbands to show support for LGBT rights at the World Cup.

"As a gay man, I refuse to play the identity politics games of the left… I'd preferably like to see the England team shut up and play," said Wootton.

Before spotting that his broadcasting career would benefit from a sharp hard-right turn, there were few figures keener than Wootton on what he now calls "failed rainbow-flag virtue signalling". As well as writing numerous opinion pieces for his old paper the *Sun* about how his homosexuality gave him a unique perspective (generally on the topic of celebrities he had helped to yank out of the closet), he was a serial flag-waver on social media.

In the space of a single week in July 2017 he posted a rainbow image on his Instagram account for Pride, boasted how staff on ITV's *Lorraine* were wearing rainbow T-shirts and other Pride symbols during his appearance, and cheered on Green Day singer Billie Joe Armstrong for yelling "No sexism, no racism, no homophobia and no Donald Trump" to the crowd at a Hyde Park concert.

A year later Wootton was using his social media accounts to praise a "powerful and moving" video by fashion presenter Gok Wan "demonstrating all the prejudice and violence faced by the LGBTQ community across the world". In 2019 he went one better, tweeting photos of the entire Sun showbiz team awkwardly posing with rainbow flags beneath the caption "The incredible Bizarre team ❤️🌈 celebrating Pride". Absolutely no virtue-signalling there!

PENALTY KICKING

PIERS MORON has been basking in his coup of securing the TalkTV interview with Cristiano Ronaldo which effectively ended the footballer's employment at Manchester United after he laid into the way the club was run.

"He can be hilarious and candid," Moron wrote in the *Sunday Times* (owned, like Talk, by News UK and seemingly obliged now to puff its ailing sister station on a weekly basis), "but he is also very honest and direct, and from my experience, much smarter than most footballers. Ronaldo just needs a club and a manager who do not treat him like the dirt that accumulates on his boots after he scores yet another hat-trick."

As *Eye* readers will be aware, this is straight from the Morgan playbook, as evidenced when cricketer Kevin Pietersen was axed from the England team. 1. Befriend celebrated sports star with ego nearly as big as his own. 2. Offer said star unquestioning platform to air his grievances. 3. Launch vehement attack on anyone who dares to suggest an alternative narrative.

The problem for Moron this time is the two columns he wrote for the *Mail on Sunday* in 2008, before he knew the Portuguese star. Back then, Ronaldo, in his first stint at United, was also kicking up a stink. After very open discussions about leaving for Real Madrid, he then, via his agent, went public with a demand for £50,000-a-week pay increase.

Morgan's response? He described the footballer as a "treacherous little toad… a serial diving cheat [who is] so self-obsessed he looked like he was going to burst into tears when he missed out on the 2007 World Player of the Year award and he's got form for wanting to quit his club." Just to make himself entirely clear, he added that "There are, I politely suggest, few more egocentric, prima donna, spoiled brat show ponies in the entire world of football than young Cristiano."

Despot Marketing

NIKE, the main kit supplier at the football World Cup, has its trademark tick boldly emblazoned across the shirts, shorts and socks of the English, French and several other teams.

How does this square with its ethical code of conduct? "We are committed to safeguarding the health of our people," it reads. "And we fully expect our suppliers, contractors and other business partners to place an equally high priority on health and safety in their operations."

Unless those business partners are giving Nike a huge advertising platform, it seems, in which case the deaths of a few thousand migrant workers in Qatar can be quietly overlooked.

"Why is the logo a ghost? Has someone died?"

"Security wouldn't let us wear rainbow flags, but dressing as Bungle, Zippy and George really outfoxed them"

"He's showing solidarity with people who can't swim"

ON THE GROPES

"MORE of the same from Labour: Chester's Labour MP had to step down for breaking parliamentary rules," declares a Tory leaflet for this Thursday's City of Chester byelection, after constituency MP Chris Matheson resigned for making "unwanted and unwelcome sexual advances" towards a junior staff member. But who are the Tories to throw shade over members' misconduct?

The last two MPs to leave the Commons in disgrace were both Conservatives. In April, Tiverton and Honiton's MP Neil Parish resigned from the Commons after watching pornography in the chamber. The next month, Imran Ahmad Khan, formerly Tory MP for Wakefield, left the Houses of Parliament for prison after he was convicted of sexually assaulting a 15-year-old boy in 2008.

Subsequent months have seen deputy chief whip Chris Pincher suspended from the party after being reported to parliament's behaviour watchdog, the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS), over his groping; and Gavin Williamson was forced to step down from the cabinet after two formal complaints to ICGS over bullying behaviour.

The Parish and Khan cases had one other thing in common besides the men's party: the Tories went on to lose both the resulting byelections spectaclularly!

KEMI-KAZE VISIT

TRADE secretary Kemi Badenoch's first official visit to the US was hobbled by her amateurish decision to pin the trip around a speech to a right-wing anti-Biden think tank.

The Department for International Trade claimed Badenoch would meet key US political figures on the November visit and "push a muscular approach" to UK-US trade on her first visit to Washington. But Badenoch, who delighted Tory newspapers over the summer with her "insurgent" anti-woke leadership campaign, chose her ideological comfort zone over diplomacy by making the centrepiece of her visit a speech to the Cato Institute.

Founded by Republican billionaire David Koch, the Cato Institute is part of what Americans call the "Kochtopus", a sprawling network of right-wing groups – and is, like Badenoch, obsessed by libertarian free-market economics and the dangers of "woke" ideas.

Not surprisingly it seems Joe Biden's administration failed to warm to Badenoch. She did not meet the key American official – Janet Yellen, the US treasury secretary – and was fobbed off with Yellen's deputy Wally Adeyemo instead.

Weirdly, the Cato Institute itself seems aware of the problem. Its website promotes "media highlights" of the Badenoch visit, but the only coverage it could find was a piece on right-wing channel GB News. The video embedded on Cato's website shows GB News' report centred on an interview with British academic David Dunn, who is critical of Badenoch's visit – specifically questioning "her choice of a speech to the Cato Institute, the libertarian right-wing think tank," adding "perhaps that's why she ended up meeting the deputy. If I was organising the trip, I think I would have done it slightly differently."

THE BREXITEERS

No. 2: George Eustice

WHEN he signed the UK up to a free trade agreement with Australia last year, former environment, food and rural affairs secretary (and Brexit supporter) George Eustice seemed to have got what he wished for.

The trade agreement, announced Eustice and then international trade secretary Ann-Marie Trevelyan in December 2021, "is a landmark moment in the historic and vital relationship between our two Commonwealth nations". It "demonstrates what we can achieve as an agile, independent sovereign trading nation… as we get on the front foot and seize the significant opportunities that await us on the world stage". Others, including the *Eye's* Bio-Waste Spreader and Britain's farmers, warned that the agreement would lead to loss of business and lower safety standards.

Now, it emerges from an anguished speech by Eustice in the Commons this month, he also appreciated what a disaster he'd just lumbered Britain with. The agreement, he admitted, "was not actually a very good deal" and "gave away far too much for far too little in return".

A good agreement, as Eustice put it to MPs, "would have been one having enduring TRQs [tariff rate quotas limiting how much can flow tariff-free] on beef in particular, but probably also for sheep". The former 'Kipper chose not to mention that one trading bloc with such a "good agreement" with Australia is, er, the European Union!

Even the food safety protections Eustice says he secured are in danger of unravelling with the UK's application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade bloc. "If some foreign court or foreign mediation process were to say as a matter of treaty that the UK had to accept beef from Australia treated with hormones, that could change the nature of this agreement considerably… [and] would have a very severe impact on British beef," he told MPs. So much for taking back control.

Driving home how bad the deal was, Eustice said that "we did not need to give Australia or New Zealand full liberalisation in beef and sheep". But the truth is his government *did* need to. Not for trade purposes, but for the political one of justifying the Brexiteers' longstanding boasts that trade agreements would be quick and easy. As one of them, the Rt Hon G Eustice, is now finding out, they are – but only if you give everything away.

SUMMER JOBS

CABINET minister Oliver Dowden certainly made the most of his short spell out of government this summer.

Between resigning as deputy party chairman and Cabinet Office minister in July over a couple of lost byelections, and returning in October as chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Dowden received £5,000 for 8-10 hours work for Heni art dealers (purveyor of Damien Hirst's "non-fungible token" collection), plus a further £8,400 for eight hours' work with the Caxton Associates LLP hedge fund.

Caxton Associates is run by Andrew Law, a major Tory donor who on 23 September hosted a party for then-chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng immediately after his doomed "fiscal event". Dowden started work for the hedgie the following day, according to parliamentary records.

Law once told an interviewer that one of his investment principles was that "politics and policy matters". What better way to gain insight into such issues than recruiting someone who has just left cabinet and is about to rejoin it? Doubtless all is above board. Dowden's new responsibilities in government include "propriety and ethics".

MAST, ER, PLAN

BLACKBURN-based firm IX Wireless continued to clutter the streets of north-west England with new masts this month, following a fine from Bury council for installing 6G infrastructure without the correct permission.

The firm was told to take down a 60ft mast in Cheadle, after putting it up without even notifying Stockport council. And Bolton residents complained after the arrival of dozens of obtrusive street poles without any consultation. In October, Bury council imposed a pathetic £120 fixed penalty on IX Wireless for installing underground equipment, even though it only had a permit to dig a trial hole on a patch of grassy open space on a residential estate.

The tiny fine shouldn't bother the firm too much, as it clearly has cash to splash. The register of members' interests shows that more than a dozen MPs, mostly Conservatives in the north of England, received donations of between £2,000 and £5,000 from IX Wireless in the past year, including Bury North MP James Daly.

"We're living through a cost of lying crisis"

FORMER Labour home secretary Lord (David) Blunkett is unhappy about Keir Starmer's plans for an elected second chamber.

The Blair-era veteran, safely ensconced on the red benches since 2015, dismissed the "revolutionary communists" who wanted to abolish the Lords. He predicted that instead of being interested in democracy, they merely wanted to appoint cronies on a list system. Which, after all, was exactly the approach to European and some other elections taken by New Labour, of which beardy Blunkett was such an adornment.

WHITEHALL may have cut its ties with Bain & Co, but don't expect mandarins to wean themselves entirely off dubious management consultancies.

Cabinet Office minister Lucy Neville-Rolfe confirmed that Bain, which colluded with corrupt former South African president Jacob Zuma, is banned from government contracts for three years. But what about KPMG, which was fined £13m for dishonesty in the sale of bedmaker Silentnight to a private equity group? That was fine, said Neville-Rolfe, because KPMG had "carried out self-cleaning measures". It was, she added, "very important companies can do the right thing". If they're caught!

GREEN SHOUTS

"The Green Party and Lib Dems are such bottom-feeding small timers, not interested in winning or actually achieving anything, just focused entirely on their attempt to eat into Labour's vote share." – ***Matt Zarb-Cousin, ex-spokesman for Jeremy Corbyn, on Twitter, 26 Jan 2019***

"I've joined the Green Party. The country will not get the change it needs from our broken political system. All in on the Greens and electoral reform" – ***Matt Zarb-Cousin on Twitter, 14 November 2022***

More HP over ☞

CALLED TO ORDURE

WESTMINSTER is not normally allowed to discuss the royal family, and flunkeys hoped to keep it that way when the Counsellors of State Bill started going through parliament.

This is the bill approving the king's choice of Anne and Edward as his stand-ins when he buggers off on foreign holidays (*"attends to important duties overseas", shurely? – Ed*). The bill started in the Lords and the "usual channels" agreed to rush it through before there was any insubordination about Princes Andy and Harry, both of whom are in abeyance as counsellors of state.

Happily, a handful of peers still managed to cause some trouble. Lord Foulkes (Lab) was first off the mark, trying to intervene on the bill's first reading. He was firmly told this was bad form. Whips congratulated themselves that Foulkes would miss the second reading debate because he was that day booked on a Council of Europe freebie in Vilnius.

The debate duly began in stately fashion, the lord privy seal Lord True emphasising that only "working" royals who lived in the UK could act as counsellors of state. In a droll reference to the game apparently known as association football, Lord Janvrin, a former royal courtier, added that Anne and Edward would "give much needed strength and depth to the bench".

The purple mood began to unravel a little when Tony Benn's talkative heir Viscount Stansgate (Lab) wondered what would happen if Anne or Edward became "unavailable through circumstances such as illness or worse"? He wanted an "update formula" for appointing counsellors of state. Another Labour hereditary, Lord Berkeley, feared Harry could reassert his identity as a counsellor of state the moment he stops living abroad. And why was Prince Andrew disqualified only *pro tem*? Why couldn't he be barred for ever from standing in for the king?

Lady Jones (Green) "couldn't care less" about the bill because constitutional monarchy was "ridiculous and crazy". This was met with a certain popping of blood vessels from traditionalists. "We are not a democracy," said Jones, "even though I am appointed myself." Royals maybe worked hard "but so do street cleaners". Her only other comment on the bill was to wonder if it broke equality laws.

Lord Balfe (Con): "What would happen if the Duke of Sussex decided to jet in? What if he saw that the king was going to Australia, got on a plane, got off at Heathrow and said 'Hi, I'm here, I'm on the succession list'?" Balfe, stirring shamelessly, thought the new Princess of Wales should be made a counsellor.

Legal pooh-bah Lord Pannick intervened to ask why Brian couldn't just reign by Zoom? What was so special about being abroad? Wasn't Scotland just as inaccessible? What happened if different counsellors of state disagreed with each other? As for Andrew and Harry remaining on the official list of counsellors, even when they are both in disgrace, "it is a curious feature to retain two people on the team sheet who will not play any part in the match". Pannick added airily: "Of course, I understand why that is." Translation: we all know Meghan Markle would go tonto.

The bill's committee stage was held two days later (normally it would be weeks or months). Berkeley said counsellors of state were important because "there has been a history, if not recently, of monarchs going mad or breaking the law". Balfe doubted the value of Princess Beatrice being a counsellor of state (which, bizarrely, she is). "She is virtually unknown," complained household name Balfe. Foulkes, who had by now returned from his Lithuanian jolly, had a grumble about being silenced on the earlier occasion. As for expunging Andrew and Harry, Lord Sentamu, the former archbishop of York, thought that would be "almost like rubbing it in".

The bill sailed towards its completion in the Lords but shortly before the end True thanked the opposition whips for their help. "I am sure that will be noted and much appreciated," he said. Translation: we must get you along to the palace some evening.

'Gavel Basher'

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

WITH Labour seen by many as a shoo-in at the next general election, the big corporates who want the ear of government are shopping on both sides of the street.

Labour is planning a shindig on 8 December which promises to be a "full day conference for business leaders in the heart of London's Canary Wharf", with corporates invited to buy tickets so they can suck up to – sorry, hear from – Labour leader Keir Starmer and shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves, plus take part in panel discussions with shadow ministers.

One of the two main sponsors of the event is HSBC bank, which has also been throwing money at the Tories. Only recently it paid former health secretary Sajid Javid £30,000 for a speech in October – not bad for two hours of his time, including prep – and last year it hired a new senior adviser in the person of Eddy Lister, aka Lord Udny-Lister, a former top aide to ex-prime minister Boris Johnson.

HSBC surely wants influence with the parties that determine how it will be taxed and regulated – it paid huge fines for misbehaviour after the 2008 financial crash – but elsewhere it has been nervous of political associations. In 2021, the London-headquartered bank denied accusations from MPs it had supported China's crackdown on Hong Kong democracy activists in 2020 by freezing accounts belonging to pro-democracy activists and appearing to welcome Beijing's oppressive new security law.

Another headline sponsor at the Labour business event is SSE (Scottish and Southern Energy), which specialises in wind-power generation. SSE has been busy lobbying against the Tories' new electricity generator levy, which puts a windfall tax on wind-generated electricity. By contrast, Labour's proposed energy windfall tax would not capture firms like SSE, despite it making hefty profits from higher electricity prices.

Lobbyists have also pitched in with funding, presumably to show clients they have access to a potential new government. Conference "partner" PLMR (Political Lobbying & Media Relations Ltd) likes to stress its political links, telling clients it includes "former MPs, past government special advisers, Downing Street press advisers, political party staff". Founder and boss Kevin Craig was once a Labour parliamentary candidate but his firm adapted to the long Tory years by recruiting former Conservative minister Anne Milton as an adviser. Recent PLMR clients include PayProp, a rent-collection tech firm for landlords, the Battersea Power Station development and energy firm Centrica.

Another conference partner is former Labour minister Jim Murphy's consultancy, Arden Strategies. Small for now, it may hope to grow with a Labour win at the next election, and is already offering "business leaders" help, for a fee, with the question: "What would a Labour government do?" A lucrative question!

HOUSING NEWS

THE death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak after exposure to mould in his home highlights the awful disrepair tenants face in social housing. But such problems are not restricted to housing associations, with tenants across tenures in a poor position to hold landlords to account.

Planned measures to improve conditions in the worst private rented homes are long overdue. Labour MP Fleur Anderson told the Commons in November about a nurse and a policeman in her Putney constituency who complained about mould in their flat, only to be given a Section 21 notice to leave – what campaigners call a "revenge eviction". Plans to extend the Decent Homes Standard to private rented homes and introduce new minimum energy efficiency standards might help, but only if cash-strapped councils can enforce them.

Those Section 21 "no-fault" evictions in the private rented sector are still happening three years after the Conservatives made a manifesto promise to abolish them, but the government is only promising a Renters' Reform Bill "as soon as parliamentary time allows". Landlords have served around 230,000 Section 21 notices since that promise was first made, according to housing charity Shelter.

The dire shortage of social housing means the private rented sector is the only option for many families. But spending plans buried deep in the Autumn Statement background documents assume that Local Housing Allowance rates will be frozen for the third year running. If so, the gap between rising rents and frozen housing benefit will continue to grow. Loss of a private tenancy is already the single biggest cause of homelessness.

Meanwhile rising mortgage rates mean landlords are looking to increase rents. Asking rents for new tenants are up 11 percent in the past 12 months, according to Rightmove, but the prospect of falling house prices is encouraging some landlords to sell up. Some may want to do so before cuts in the tax-free allowance for capital gains introduced in the Autumn Statement take effect.

All this will worsen the shortage of long-term rental homes that is already evident thanks to the rise in Airbnb and other platforms, which landlords see as more lucrative and less hassle. Tory backbencher Selaine Saxby recently told the Commons the private rented sector in her North Devon constituency has shrunk by 60 percent in the past two years. Homes that might rent for £800 a month can fetch at least that per week, and perhaps double, as short-term lets. Tellingly, the government consultation on the issue is led not by the housing department but the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport – ie the department for *leisure*.

As another new ministerial team settles in at the housing ministry – welcome to fifth housing minister this year (and landlord) Lucy Frazer – MPs from all parties are calling for renter reform.

"Sorry, did you say spare room, or spore room?"

MATT HANCOCK 10 REASONS NOT TO FORGIVE OR FORGET

a handy cut out 'n' keep guide by MD

FORMER health secretary and third-placed *I'm a Celebrity*... finalist Matt Hancock was well prepared when questioned on his pandemic performance, telling ITV viewers: "Campmates ask questions and its only respectful to give completely straight and truthful answers." He then admitted to just one mistake – the one he'd been caught bang to rights on.

Hancock said he was "much, much more robust in his defence of how he'd managed the pandemic as a whole", without giving any detail other than the harm was "caused by the virus, not by the people trying to manage the virus". It would be churlish to blame all the damage done by the most complicated peacetime threat in a century on one man, but Matt "Blame the Virus" Hancock is still a long way from giving a straight and truthful account of his errors...

1 Pisspoor preparation

The UK was hideously poorly prepared for the pandemic, despite it being top on the National Risk Register with training exercises (Cygnus for flu and Alice for coronavirus) concluding we were indeed hideously ill prepared, didn't have capacity for patients, testing and personal protective equipment (PPE) and needed to step up.

Alas, former health secretary Jeremy Hunt did not prepare. Hancock replaced him on *9 July 2018*, and so had 18 months to spot pandemic as the UK's top risk. When it struck, he could have co-opted Hunt to share responsibility and blame. Hunt may well have refused, preferring the safety of chairing the health committee, where he later described our pandemic response as "one of the worst public health disasters in UK history". If only we'd known...

2 No early testing

THE Sars-CoV-2 virus spread quickly, often before symptoms appeared. Our only chance to contain it and avoid lockdowns was at the start, but we needed early testing to spot it at our borders, reduce community spread and help focus protection on the most vulnerable in their homes, care homes and hospitals. Once out of control, it moved beyond the capacity and capability of any testing system.

Fortunately, PCR tests were developed by January 2020 and the UK had dozens of academic laboratories with the facilities and skilled staff to process results. For example, at the Francis Crick Institute in London, staff were meeting 10-15 percent of total UK test capacity. Director Paul Nurse, a 2001 Nobel prize winner in physiology/medicine, appealed to Hancock to roll out his institute's work countrywide.

Within weeks, he argued, local laboratories could provide a 24-hour turnaround testing service using pre-existing healthcare logistics. As Nurse told the *BMJ*: "We wrote to Hancock about it. Peter Ratcliffe, clinical physician and another Nobel laureate, wrote to him. We talked about it on the radio and television. We got no replies, then after three months we got a holding note from a civil servant. It beggars belief."

The NHS labs were desperate to ramp up testing. Instead, they were sidelined when most needed. Hancock must explain why he did not use all available labs.

3 No PPE store

THE fact we had no store of the right, in-date PPE is a clear indicator of poor preparedness. As Nurse observed: "We were being run by accountants rather than those who know what goes on – it's the cost of having a warehouse that is immediately available, and you might throw stuff away after 5-10 years, but you keep it stocked up, compared with cost of doing nothing and killing people."

Hancock kept insisting there was enough PPE but it was "a very precious resource". And so is a critical care nurse in a bin liner and a face visor made by a local primary school. One matter for the public inquiry is how many health and care staff died after probably contracting the virus at work wearing inadequate or no PPE.

4 Illegal discharge and death

WITH PPE and tests in short supply, and spiralling infection, Hancock and his advisers made a unilateral decision to discharge NHS patients back to care homes without testing them, a move judged two years later by the high court to have been illegal. It was also appalling infection control, given that the likelihood of asymptomatic spreading was well known at this stage (*Eye* 1521), and that you were most likely to die from Covid the older and frailer you were.

In the first wave of Covid there were an estimated 29,000 excess deaths in UK care homes, mostly from Covid. After the ruling that he'd acted illegally, Hancock did apologise to "all those who lost loved ones" but hasn't admitted any error. In truth, the lack of staff, space, PPE and testing in hospitals and care homes meant vulnerable patients and overworked staff members were sitting ducks for Covid despite Hancock's claim to "put a protective ring" around the most vulnerable.

5 Favours for friends

HANCOCK scoured the planet for PPE and testing materials, but sometimes found them closer to home. For example, Alex Bourne was awarded £30m for supplying vials for NHS Covid test kits, despite having no prior experience. He was, however, the landlord of The Cock Inn, one of Hancock's local pubs in Suffolk, and ran a business providing paper and plastic cups to music festivals. Hancock and Bourne exchanged messages before and after the contracts were awarded, but Hancock claimed in parliament to have played no part in the awards. When Hancock was repeatedly challenged on this, Bourne WhatsApped him to joke "Matt Hancock – never heard of him".

Bourne's company didn't take money directly from the Department of Health and Social Care but was subcontracted to a company which did, with a stipulation that the manufacturing be done by Bourne's company; 8m test tubes delivered by his firm to the NHS had to be recalled on quality grounds.

6 Private outsourcing

THE *Eye*'s Profits of Doom columns provide detailed evidence of pisspoor pandemic purchasing, with private sector outsourcing, shady middlemen and overseas suppliers for testing, tracing and PPE repeatedly preferred to public service expertise, investment and development and the use of local providers.

For all the billions spent on Dido Harding's Test and Trace experiment, the evidence that it contained spread, prevented lockdowns and delivered value for money is poor. And most troubling is the number of PPE contracts that failed to deliver, or delivered poor value, in the government's VIP fast lane.

7 Nightingale hospitals

ONE of Hancock's proudest achievements is the building of Nightingale Hospitals in record time from March 2020 onwards, while forgetting they need to be staffed. Of the seven built in England, only three ever treated patients; by January 2021, a grand total of 272 patients had been treated, at a cost of more than £500m.

The facilities in Birmingham, Sunderland, Bristol and Harrogate didn't treat a single Covid-19 inpatient during that time. There simply weren't enough staff to spread across the NHS and they have now been decommissioned.

8 Extraordinary ambush

HANCOCK would doubtless like to take credit for the UK's Covid vaccine programme but responsibility for development was taken away from the Department of Health and given to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and a UK Vaccine Taskforce headed by Kate Bingham. In her book, Bingham accuses a petulant Hancock of "an extraordinary ambush that could have derailed the vaccine project" in a meeting in June 2020 (*Eye* 1584). Fortunately, Bingham decided to stick with the project and ignore an angry, error-strewn Hancock rather than walk away.

9 Massive humbug

HANCOCK mimicked Johnson's overconfidence at the start of the pandemic before becoming a stickler for the rules: he was outraged when epidemiologist and government adviser Professor Neil Ferguson broke rules to allow his girlfriend to visit during lockdown, declaring it a matter for the police and reiterating how important the social distancing rules were – before writing and enforcing many more of them.

10 Love conquers all

WHILE on *I'm a Liability*, Hancock admitted to just one error: breaching his own social distancing rules with university friend and assistant Gina Coladangelo. He did not explain why he had employed her at public expense and what the interview process involved. He did not admit to any earlier breaches of the rules outside the gaze of a security camera. He fell in love, broke a rule but not the law. "I messed up, I fessed up, I resigned." If only it were that simple.

In fact, Hancock "messed up" on 6 May 2021 but didn't "fess up" until 25 June, when footage of him "messing up" with Coladangelo appeared in the *Sun*. And he didn't swiftly resign, knowing Johnson was unlikely to sack him for such a Johnson-like indiscretion. It took him until 6pm the following day to do the right thing.

Without the leak, Hancock would not have fessed up and might well still be health secretary, steering us through the worst crisis the NHS has known. As it is, he's been paid by the taxpayer to serve his constituents in a cost-of-living crisis whilst trousering £400,000 for a carefully staged redemption on the other side of the world. As Hancock explained: "What I'm really looking for is a bit of forgiveness."

"You're free to go. You've said sorry, so apparently that's OK, then"

SIGNAL FAILURES

Cancel culture

AS THE rail strikes drag on interminably and more disruption for engineering works lies in store over the Christmas hols, passengers won't have been surprised by recent statistics showing rising train cancellations.

But the stats carefully omit occasions when train firms chucked their usual timetables overboard, including on strike days. "The cancellations score only takes account of trains cancelled from the planned reduced service," explains the Office of Rail Regulation. In other words, the figures just reflect *unplanned* cancellations, not the total number of trains that didn't run.

Some firms, most famously Avanti West Coast, have temporarily erased services from timetables because they're poorly managed or employ too few drivers or both. And as *Eye* 1568 reported in March, train companies have granted themselves the freedom to publish a reduced "timetable of the day" at any time until 10pm the evening before.

Even so, in the first quarter of 2022, compared with a year previously, cancellations increased at 15 of the 20 "national rail" train firms, which operate on behalf of national and devolved governments.

Timetable triumph

NEW train timetables from 12 December bring good cheer for people in the West Midlands, after a marathon effort by the fragmented rail industry to undo the damage it inflicted on passengers back in 2008.

After the west-coast mainline's chaotic "modernisation" (*Eyes passim*), London-centric mandarins in the then Labour government's Department for Transport (DafT) insisted on three full-length intercity trains each hour from Euston to both Birmingham New Street and Manchester Piccadilly. "Advance" tickets were offered for a few quid each to "fill a lot of empty seats".

DafT ensured the trains left for Birmingham every 20 minutes, ditto for Manchester. Local services in both city regions were worsened to accommodate DafT's intercity drumbeat (*Eye* 1224). But a regular "turn up and go" service is far more useful on local routes than intercity ones, where people tend to plan their trips and eyewatering peak fares force many to buy advance tickets tied to specified trains.

From 12 December Avanti West Coast should (in theory) run London-Birmingham expresses every 30 minutes, plus an hourly train stopping at intermediate stations. The uneven spacing allows regular trains at last for Birmingham-Walsall and small stations on the mainline each side of Coventry. And there's timetable space too for a new local service (stopping at three brand-new stations in Brum) from next December.

If the rail system had a sensible unified structure, the 2008 muddle would have been reversed long ago by a few rail managers sitting around a table (or wouldn't have happened in the first place). The fragmented industry has spent years on the process. A west-coast mainline "industry planning group" brought together train firms, Network Rail, DafT and others. An "event steering group", as stipulated in the regulatory "network code", handled timetable development. The region's Grand Railway Collaboration, formed in 2019 to improve train performance, ran a parallel process.

There would have been even more bureaucracy had Covid not wrecked all franchises. Since then all ticket revenue goes to the government, so rearranging timetables across train firms no longer needs lawyers and the "disputes resolution" mechanism for negotiations on contracts, timetable "rights" and compensation for predicted losses of ticket revenue/profit. But Rail Partners, representing train firms, is now lobbying for "reinvigorated public-private partnership" and the return of "revenue incentives" for individual firms. The inept government could well agree.

'Dr B Ching'

ROAD RAGE

Duty calls

THE Office of Budget Responsibility's forecast of a "planned" 23 percent fuel-duty increase in three months' time – not mentioned in chancellor Jeremy Hunt's Autumn Statement – follows years of ministers ignoring the road-taxation system's flaws.

Fuel duty was frozen from 2011 (even in years when oil prices were low) until March 2022, when the then-chancellor Rishi Sunak cut it by 5p for one year only. The OBR says the government will forgo £5.7bn of (urgently needed) receipts next year if it doesn't impose the record increase next spring, raising petrol or diesel prices by around 12p a litre.

Such a jump in one go would bring hardship to many people and could trigger a repeat of the 2000 fuel-price protests which rocked Tony Blair's Labour government. But fuel-duty receipts are dwindling, as more people use electric cars and chancellors keep cutting duty in real terms.

The biggest financial rewards from duty cuts go to people well off enough to drive high mileages in chunky cars with little regard to fuel efficiency. The poorest receive little benefit (some drive small cars frugally, many are car-less) and suffer disproportionately from the public-spending cuts which have, in effect, funded the shrinking fuel-duty.

Hunt did announce in his budget that he would "make our motoring tax system fairer" by stopping the vehicle-duty exemption for electric vehicles (after the next general election). He ignored the fuel-duty revenue losses, and didn't signal a future pay-as-you-drive system to replace current charges with tariffs which could be varied to help achieve government aims, including fairness (*Eye* 1575).

'Hedgehog'

WAZE TO SHOP

WAZE is the wildly popular free driving app that uses crowdsourced data for up-to-the-minute directions and traffic alerts. Except of course it isn't.

Since 2013 Waze has been owned by Google, and like its sugar daddy it's actually an advertising platform. The company recently ran an advertorial in the marketing trade press that admitted as much: "Simply, Waze is used for driving footfall to physical stores," said Ruairidh Roberts, Waze's UK manager. "If you appear on our map, and your competitor doesn't, we know we're driving footfall to your business."

This may be news to Waze's many fans, notably those who thought the point of the app was to get you to your destination, rather than funnel you towards a shop. But Roberts made Waze's *raison d'être* clear: "The success of Waze has come from allowing advertisers to be present, contextually and locally."

"I can't believe we have to buy our own oars and pay rent for our seats"

The Agri Brigade

AN ARGUMENT is raging between retailers and producers about what is causing egg rationing in some UK supermarkets. Is it the result of hens being culled due to bird flu, as some supermarkets maintain; or are farmers reducing production because supermarkets are unwilling to pay them a fair price?

Production costs depend on how hens are managed. More humane systems such as organic, RSPCA-approved or free-range production cost more. This is because hens are given more space inside buildings, access to the outdoors, and the opportunity to dust bathe. Tragically, nearly 40 percent of UK eggs are still produced by hens confined to cages that provide each bird with usable floor space equivalent to less than a sheet of A4 paper.

Whatever the system, the cost of egg production has risen sharply in the past year. The price of chicken feed has nearly doubled, and the cost of heating and lighting hen houses has more than tripled.

The British Free Range Egg Producers Association (BFREPA) claims supermarkets have not raised the wholesale price sufficiently to cover the massive inflation in their production costs. While the price of eggs on supermarket shelves has risen by roughly 45p per dozen, only 5-10p of this has filtered down to egg farmers, leaving many producers losing serious amounts of money.

A BFREPA survey of its members reveals that a third of free-range producers have either reduced their flock sizes, paused production temporarily, or left the industry. This is borne out by figures from the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) which point to shrinking egg production. UK egg-packing stations packed 9m fewer dozens in the third quarter of 2022, compared with the previous quarter.

Some supermarkets claim the shortages are due to hens being culled to help control bird flu, and undoubtedly the epidemic has had some effect. But whatever the degree to which egg producers are reducing their flock sizes due to bird-flu worries, the cost-price squeeze supermarkets are applying is making a difficult situation much worse. Supermarket parsimony is therefore contributing towards shortages, and the resultant restrictions on how many boxes of eggs shoppers are allowed to buy.

Similarly awkward is the appearance on Sainsbury's shelves of what are described as "Italian barn eggs". This from a supermarket that recently declared "At Sainsbury's we care about the hens laying our eggs. This year we are proud to move to offering only free-range eggs in store and online, sourced from free-range farms in the UK."

'Bio-Waste Spreader'

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

COURT OUT

LAWYERS acting for the London borough of Croydon were sent off with their tails between their legs when they took a local news website to the high court in November.

Mr Justice Nicklin, England's most senior media judge, could barely disguise his contempt for the council's attempt to use an emergency injunction to gag *Inside Croydon* journalist Steven Downes, who had simply published what the local authority had posted on its website six weeks previously.

"You're trying to put the genie back in the bottle," said m'lud. "It's a bit of a stretch [to think] that you can keep a secret which has been seen by 16,000 people."

He dismissed the council's request for a third-party injunction against publishing the documents and also allowed the website to keep all its reports online, which were based on two pieces of "highly confidential" legal advice. *Inside Croydon* gave an undertaking not to publish anything further from the advice documents.

The legal advice had included suggestions of what to do over the controversial £437,000 golden handshake paid to former council chief executive Jo "Negreedy" Negrini in 2020, just before the cash-strapped council went bust for the first time.

Croydon claimed that the legal letters had been published on its website due to a technical glitch. The council only became aware that the confidential documents had been put into the public domain when *Inside Croydon* started asking questions about them.

Total cost to Croydon council taxpayers for this exercise in futility brought by their monitoring officer, Stephen Lawrence-Orumwense? An estimated £20,000.

● **IT'S NOT as if Croydon can afford such extravagance. The council last week issued its *third* Section 114 notice in two years, and warned that a fourth might be in the post to Michael Gove and his Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) unless they cough up even more bailout cash.**

S114 notices – effective admission by a local authority of bankruptcy – used to be rare things. Croydon's first, in November 2020, was only the second to be issued by a local authority in England this century. In 2021, DLUHC handed over £120m to Croydon to tide it over – then a record bailout. Another £25m this year brings the total since 2020 to £145m.

Jane West, Croydon's fourth finance director in two years, has issued the latest S114 months before she needed to because she reckons the south London borough will overspend by £77m in 2023-2024. Even in those dark Covid days of 2020, Croydon's budget-busting overspend was a "mere" £63m.

On West's wishlist of possible solutions is "a write-off of all or part of the council's outstanding debt", revised lending terms or permission to hike council tax above the 5 percent cap imposed by government. And perhaps a moratorium on wasting money on attempts to intimidate journalists? Every little helps.

PLYMOUTH UNSOUND

RICHARD BINGLEY's chaotic tenure as Conservative leader of Plymouth city council hangs by a thread after he was formally reprimanded by Emma Jackman, the council's monitoring officer and head of legal services. The rebuke followed the upholding of numerous complaints against Bingley by other councillors – nearly all of whom were fellow Tories – for having breached the members' code of conduct.

Among the successful complainants was Cllr Maddi Bridgeman, like Bingley a former Ukipper (*Eye* 1571). Jackson concluded that Bridgeman had been treated with a lack of "courtesy, respect and equality" by Bingley. No sooner had her complaints been upheld than she was contacted by a council officer working in "democratic support services" and told that Bingley had decreed that she was no longer a member of the Conservative group and would henceforth be counted as an Independent.

During a recent council meeting, Bingley's predecessor as Tory leader, Nick Kelly, who now also sits as an Independent, objected after he allegedly heard Bingley mouth the words "You're dead". When Kelly raised this with the chair, one of Bingley's acolytes, Pat Patel, commented: "He's talking fucking crap. I've had enough of this."

Meanwhile Bingley has been left looking stupid after giving the go-ahead for the council to spend £5m in preparation for building a £60m health hub. The money was spent before the government agreed to cough up its slice of £41m toward the project – which it has since declined to do.

Since Bingley took office in March the city's finances have spiralled out of control, with the budget deficit reaching £37.5m. Impressive!

MORRIS DANCE

BACK in July we reported that leading Tories at Hertsmere council who had been found guilty of inciting racism against a Jewish Labour election candidate had been allowed to appeal the findings of a Tory Central Office investigation following a convenient change in the rulebook (*Eye* 1577). The four were supported by local Tory MP Oliver Dowden. But now Conservative party HQ has dismissed the appeals by council leader Morris Bright, councillors Brett Rosehill and Glenn Briski and former election agent Jane West.

One councillor who did not appeal is Paul Morris, who owns the "Hertsmere News" digital billboard outside Borehamwood and Elstree station, which spread fake news aimed at Labour candidate Dan Ozarow, now a councillor. Cllr Morris resigned from the Tory party after the findings of the investigation were made public and now sits as an "Independent". But he evidently is still held in some regard by his former Conservative colleagues, who invited him to join the council's audit committee, with a Tory member being told to stand down to make way for the "Independent". Labour complained that a substitution on a committee could only be allowed on a like-for-like basis – that is, if the incoming member was of the same political group as the outgoing. The council's legal officers confirmed this and Morris was refused the committee seat. Life can be so unfair.

STOP PRESS: At a council meeting last week, Cllr Morris declared that he would be rejoining the Tory fold in January – thereby side-stepping any awkwardness about committee memberships and exposing his "Independent" interlude as a sham.

● **MEANWHILE in Scarborough, the local Labour party has successfully pulled a similar trick in favour of one of its former members, who was suspended from the party at the insistence of the national executive committee after being arrested four times and jailed twice for taking part in illegal Just Stop Oil protests, including gluing herself to the M25. After losing the Labour whip and becoming an "unaffiliated" councillor, Theresa "Gluey" Norton was no longer able to sit as a Labour member of the standards committee. But she now has a new role, much more useful to Labour council leader Steve Siddons. Following the death of "unaffiliated" councillor Hazel Lynskey there arose a vacancy on the powerful planning and development committee. The like-for-like rule allowed the "unaffiliated" (but actually Labour-supporting) Cllr Norton on to the finely balanced committee – giving Labour control and the ability to push through Siddons' pet scheme, the unpopular West Pier "regeneration" project. Democracy works in mysterious ways.**

IN OTHER NEWS: Six councillors from the Independent group on **Ashfield** district council, Nottinghamshire, including council leader Jason Zadrozny, were arrested in connection with a variety of alleged offences including fraud, money laundering, misconduct in public office and electoral offences. Cllr Zadrozny said the allegations were politically motivated and "we have 100 percent done nothing wrong". No one has been charged... **Kent** Conservative county councillor Andy Weatherhead resigned after being outed by anti-fascist group Hope Not Hate as a former senior officer in the New British Union, a Mosleyite group which seeks to emulate the pre-war British Union of Fascists. Weatherhead left the NBU in 2014 and unsuccessfully stood for Ukip four times before being elected as a Tory for Hythe West last year. It is just over a year since Hope Not Hate exposed another Tory councillor, Tim Wills, of **Worthing** borough council, as being a supporter of the white supremacist group Patriotic Alternative, on a mission to "infiltrate" the Tories (*Eye* 1559... Labour **Hackney** council continues to pay £100,000 a month to the operators of the Shuttleworth hostel for homeless people, where four residents have died since 2016, according to the *Hackney Gazette*... **Leicester** city council invoked a medieval charter granted by King John in 1199 to charge organisers of Christmas lights events in suburban Oadby and Wigston £64 each because they are "rival markets" to Leicester market...

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH LONDON KNIFE & PACKER

WHILST I ADMIRE YOUR ZEAL FOR DIY INSULATING, I WONDER IF YOU MAY BE TAKING IT TOO FAR?
AU CONTRAIRE, MAX. NO ROOF, NO WALL CAVITY AND NO FLOOR SHALL REMAIN UNINSULATED ON OUR WATCH!
THIS WENDY HOUSE MUST HAVE NO CLIMATIC WEAK POINTS...
NOW ON TO YOUR BIKE SHED!

FIVE TV

Fifa World Cup 2022 (BBC/ITV)

THE BBC's News and Sports divisions often have an uneasy relationship. The football team, understandably keen backers of England's bid to host the 2018 World Cup, have never quite forgiven the current affairs squad for *Fifa's Dirty Secrets*, a 2010 edition of *Panorama* suggesting serious corruption in the international game, which was broadcast three days before Fifa members picked host countries. Many in the sport blame the documentary for England losing 2018 delegate votes to Russia in a double process that also picked Qatar for 2022.

But two successive World Cups in autocratic regimes that deny human rights seem to have convinced the jocks that Beeb journalists were right to query Fifa, several officials of which were later found guilty of malpractice. The unofficial leader of Britain's liberals, Gary Lineker, responded to Twitter stick for reporting from Qatar with the promise that match coverage would be a "mini-*Panorama*".

Fronting the first match (the opening ceremony piously unshown, although Vladimir Putin's Russian parade was screened four years ago), **Qatar v Ecuador**, Lineker seemed to be channelling the Richard Dimbleby era of BBC current affairs, wearing heavy black-framed spectacles and a stern expression. The great crisp advocate's script had also changed flavour, the signature cheesy puns replaced by salty and vinegary morality: "The smallest nation to host football's greatest tournament has faced some big questions – from accusations of corruption in winning the bid to the treatment of migrant workers and homosexuals." Ros Atkins of *BBC News* then delivered an "explainer" on the lethal consequences of expressing gay love or building football stadia in the desert emirate.

When ITV kicked off its coverage with **Senegal v Netherlands**, star pundit Roy Keane tackled the host nation harder than the most brutally bruised of his midfield opponents: "The World Cup shouldn't be here." The "corrupt" government had no cause to treat "migrant workers and gay people… like that".

Most will agree with Keane that Qatar should never have been given the tournament, a move that then required the traditional summer fixture to switch to November-December to avoid peak temperatures – hardly unexpected – that were potentially fatal for players. However, once it was there and BBC and ITV agreed to cover it, the constant sub-Twitter distancing felt hypocritical and self-cleansing. Watching sport through an ethical lens can never be exhaustive or it would become exhausting.

Having savaged Qatar, the ITV pundits tipped Brazil as winners of the tournament, oddly neglecting to critique the corrupt and bigoted administration of Jair Bolsonaro. When **Argentina v Saudi Arabia** was unexpectedly lost by the South Americans, both ITV and BBC panels sang for the underdog (a long World Cup TV tradition) without feeling the need to excoriate the House of Saud's rulers for banning homosexuality and non-Islamic religion or murdering the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi and slicing him into a suitcase. (UK broadcasters also happily cover cricket internationals involving Pakistan, despite the hateful beliefs and actions on the part of some leaders there.)

And, with broadcasters keen to reduce tweet beating for coming to a place where they fervently felt the World Cup should never have gone, the coverage resembled a tournament of piety rather than football – "The England players kneel to send the message around the world that inclusivity is important" (**England v Iran**, BBC1); "This World Cup is triggering for those with gambling problems!" (*Today* programme, BBC Radio 4); "Lots of moral and political issues have been raised at this World Cup. And the FA has tonight lit up Wembley Arch in rainbow colours in support of the LGBTQ community" (**England v USA**, ITV).

At least host Mark Pougatch got through half-time of the Transatlantic match without asking Keane and Ian Wright about the influence of the Roe v Wade reversal on the mid-terms, but the *Panoramic* approach on both sides left viewers on edge. Would BBC1's **Croatia v Canada** be prefaced by an Atkins package on the time prime minister Justin Trudeau wore black-face?

On Sunday, Lineker interrupted football discussion of **Spain v Germany** to report: "Earlier today, the Spanish coach tweeted in memory of his daughter who died from bone cancer. Puts it all in perspective!" But such was the thrust of the coverage, it was unclear whether this family tragedy related to human rights abuses or the football.

The sense that not enough attention was being paid to the sport increased in BBC1's **Belgium v Morocco**, when commentator Guy Mowbray identified the wrong Moroccan goalkeeper for most of the first half. Perhaps he was distracted by reading Amnesty International reports on prisons in Rabat.

It felt like a relief when, on Saturday's ITV coverage of **France v Denmark**, Ally McCoist provided precise analysis of the movement and technique of France's sublime striker, Kylian Mbappé, rather than fretting over whether he should have posed with Putin after receiving the 2018 Young Player of the World Cup prize.

'Remote Controller'

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

MEDIA NEWS

PEER PRESSURE

IN APRIL the National Crime Agency announced an investigation into PPE Medpro, a company which received hundreds of millions in public cash for Covid-related contracts.

Police raided properties including the home of Conservative peer Michelle Mone, who had introduced the firm to the government's "VIP lane" for procurement of personal protective equipment. Despite coverage elsewhere, the BBC failed to feature the story.

"We've received complaints from audience members who feel we haven't sufficiently reported on the recent execution of search warrants at several properties by the Isle of Man Constabulary," the corporation admitted several weeks later. "Decisions about stories are based on a range of editorial considerations, including legal advice. We conduct our own checks on stories in order to be sure we can stand by our journalism… This is a developing story and we will continue to follow it closely."

So, how did the BBC react last week when the story developed quite spectacularly with news that Mone and her children received £29m of the profits of PPE Medpro's deals, funnelled through a secret offshore trust, despite her lawyers' previous insistence that "she did not benefit financially and was not connected to PPE Medpro in any capacity"?

Presumably it is still following as closely as ever. But the corporation declined to feature the *Guardian* front page which carried the scoop on any of its national paper review slots on 23/24 November, to discuss it on air, or even to show it in a display of the morning's front pages online. Only when Labour deputy leader Angela Rayner raised it as an urgent question in the House of Commons – and therefore under parliamentary privilege – did the Beeb feel safe to mention it at all, with a brief 300-word website report and a piece on the News channel. Even these did not appear until eight hours after Rayner and hapless junior health minister Neil O'Brien had left the chamber. Why? Is this the long shadow of Cliff Richard?

DUMB BRITAIN

The Chase, ITV

Bradley Walsh: What was the name of the Mitford sisters' only brother?
Contestant: Emily.

Walsh: Which American civil rights leader was jailed in Alabama in 1963?
Contestant: Al Capone.

Tipping Point, ITV

Ben Shephard: In May 2021 Christie's auctioned "*Waterloo Bridge, effet de brouillard*", by the French impressionist painter Claude… who?
Contestant: Van Damme.

Brain of Britain, Radio 4

Russell Davies: What may be the best-known of all the songs in the musical *Les Miserables*, "I Dreamed a Dream", is sung by which character?
Contestant: Courgette.

FUGGING LIBERTIES

AMONG the flagrant fictionalisations in the new series of Netflix's *The Crown* is the portrayal of former Harrods landlord Mohamed Al-Fayed.

The drama "buffs out many of the rough edges and allegations" the Egyptian-born tycoon has faced, suggested *Vanity Fair*, and instead presents him as "a charming scamp who fostered a childhood fascination with the crown and who relates to Diana as an establishment outsider".

Back in 1998, *Eye* 951 took a less sympathetic view, revealing that "Fayed is, in short, obsessed by sex", and providing details of countless times when "secretaries have been flown to Paris, piled with gifts and champagne and then sexually propositioned". Al-Fugger was described as a "revolting old lecher" who is "one of the few men in the world who actually boasts about having a tiny penis".

Salim Daw, who plays him in *The Crown,* told *Radio Times* that the Phoney Pharaoh is "so motivated to be on the top that this actually dictates the way he lives his life and the way he behaves". That's one way of putting it!

If anyone should know the dirty details about Fayed, it's *Vanity Fair*. In 1995 the magazine published an excoriating profile of the then Harrods owner detailing his sexual behaviour, racism and mistreatment of staff at great length. Fayed sued for libel, and the battle went all the way to the doors of the High Court, running up eye-watering legal fees for both sides – only for the phoney pharaoh to abruptly drop his action two years later, without any retraction from the magazine.

TALK ISN'T CHEAP

THE last *Eye* touched on the above-market rate fees TalkTV has been paying guests to appear on its shows. In August, Rebekah Vardy picked up £50,000 to maintain her ludicrous pretence that she was the wronged party in the "Wagatha Christie" libel case. Cristiano Ronaldo's interview with Piers Moron will have seen the footballer pick up at least double that sum.

However, the latest Commons register of members' interests shows that, so desperate is Talk to attract guests to pad out airtime to entertain its viewers (Sid and Doris Bonkers), it has been quietly boosting the bank balance of some very low-ranking MPs, whom most hacks, never mind voters, wouldn't recognise.

Between them, five MPs – Jake Berry, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, Bim Afolami, Carolyn Harris and Alec Shelbrooke (*Who they? Ed*) – have picked up more than £23,000 for going on the channel to discuss political issues. Afolami has been paid nearly £9,000 since Talk launched in April, at a rate of what he claims is £450 an hour – the others for some reason only get an hourly rate of £250. Rival outfit GB News is also involved in this game, sometimes paying up to £500 for MPs to appear on a panel discussion.

Apart from the BBC's *Question Time* or *Any Answers* programmes – on which an MP would seldom appear more than once a year, and for which the going rate is £200-£250 – a serving politician would never expect to be paid to talk shop on the Beeb, ITV or Sky.

Perhaps Talk, so keen to shine a light on the machinations of the Westminster elite, could hold a debate on the issue?

REMOANER FERRET

"The EU Referendum was, as then Prime Minister David Cameron made crystal clear, a final decision & the result would be honoured. Remoaners would be shrieking this fact every second if the result had gone the other way & Brexiters were trying to overturn it" – ***Tweet by Piers Moron, September 2018***

"REMINDER: Both Labour and the Conservatives pledged to honour the Brexit referendum result in their manifestos at the subsequent election. So spare me all this Remoaner guff about prorogation 'destroying democracy'. Those destroying democracy are those seeking to stop Brexit." – ***Tweet by Piers Moron, August 2019***

"It's time to admit that Brexit has been a disaster, exacerbated by pandemic/war, and have another referendum which as this poll indicates, would surely result in a substantial majority now voting for us to return to the EU."
– ***Tweet by Piers Moron, November 2022***

DESPERATE BUSINESS

JON & MICK / MODERN TOSS

FROCK HORROR

IN October a Channel 4 documentary *Inside the Shein Machine* depicted life inside two factories in Guangzhou which supply Chinese fast-fashion company Shein.

The documentary exposed appalling working conditions, with some employees working up to 18 hours a day, with only one day's break per month. In one factory, workers were given the equivalent of just 3p per item and could have two-thirds of their day's wage deducted for making a mistake.

Mysteriously, both the *Mirror* and *Express* decided against reporting Channel 4's findings. Now the *Mirror* tells readers that Shein "has a reputation for being one of the most affordable fashion brands in the world", while the *Express* claims that "at Shein, you can find the freshest styles for all occasions at affordable prices". Coincidentally, discount codes for the retailer are being advertised across the *Mirror* and *Express*.

There were no such qualms at the *Sun*, which on the day of the broadcast ran with "LOSING ITS SHEIN: The shocking truth behind your bargain fashion hauls", explaining how the documentary had "uncovered the dark side" of the retailer. A fortnight later, the *Mail* chipped in, reporting that TV personality Georgia Toffolo "has cut short her contract with Shein after she was branded 'exploitative' by charities over her deal with the Chinese fast fashion outlet".

Despite knowing all about the exploitation in Shein's supply chain, however, the *Sun* is now delightedly telling online readers the brand is one of its "favourite stores", while the *Mail* is claiming the retailer is a staple "for all fashionistas around the world… there's only one way this brand is going, and that's to the top".

AD NAUSEAM

THE John Lewis Christmas ad, an event now more hallowed than the birth of the saviour, has been jerking tears countrywide with its depiction of a man who trains himself to skateboard so he can be a better companion to his new foster child. John Lewis then pledges its commitment to "supporting the futures" of young people from care.

Which is lovely, but among all of the sob stuff it's gone unnoticed that John Lewis's long-time advertising agency Adam & Eve/DDB has grown lazy: it was only two years ago that a German mail-order pharmacy called DocMorris ran a widely applauded Christmas ad featuring a grandpa who trained himself with weights so he could lift his granddaughter to put the star on top of the Christmas tree. We assume the similarity is a complete coincidence.

A HAPPY by-product of the collapse of in-store retail has been big brands being forced to try and make themselves likeable. Shorn of price and convenience incentives – it's almost always cheaper and easier on Amazon – the supermarkets now rely on moral impetus: we're nicer than that tax-dodging weirdo Jeff Bezos, essentially.

As such, there's a sudden emphasis on good works in this year's retail advertising. Aldi's ad, possibly in response to John Lewis's worthiness (see above), tags on a partnership with Neighbourly at the end, stressing the fact that it has donated more than 25m meals to the homeless since 2019.

Lidl's lost teddy bear ties into a campaign encouraging giving toys to local kids, and even evil empire McDonald's notes that "We're giving to Children in Need". With brands struggling to make any impact with the usual methods, could this signal the start of the age of goodvertising?

"HOW does YouTube help keep children protected on the platform? We're always looking at ways to create an appropriate environment for family content on YouTube, so we invest heavily in the policies, technology and teams that help to provide children and families with the best protection possible," claims the video-sharing site. So how's that going?

Late last month the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld three complaints concerning an ad by ITV-backed "feelgood" shopping and media brand Planet Woo, which appeared on YouTube earlier this year. The ad featured a couple looking at racy photographs of naked women, which one of them called "fucking amazing" before requesting their partner bring a "camera to the dungeon today".

According to the ASA, the ad was served on numerous YouTube channels "which were likely to have significant child and family audiences", such as Kids Fun TV and channels dedicated to Minecraft. Is this offering the best protection possible?

MALGORITHMS

A feature dedicated to excellence in online advertising…

***Guardian*: "**COP27: 'We're on a highway to climate hell', UN head tells world leaders"

Accompanying ad: "50% of the sky belongs to us. 1 out of 2 general aviation turbine aircraft flying today is built by Textron Aviation"

***HuffPost* (via MSN news): "**'Trump is done': Damning viral video shows even his friends are mocking him"

Accompanying ad: "This is the reason why you shouldn't throw out orange peel"

More Media over ☞

ANTI-SOCIAL MEDIA

TWITTER is preparing to relaunch its multi-tier Twitter Blue subscription service following last month's shambolic start (*Eye* 1586), but exactly when is not known.

New owner Elon Musk had said the verification system was on hold "until there is high confidence of stopping impersonation" but has since claimed that "all verified accounts will be manually authenticated" – though how Twitter plans to implement this, having shed so many of its full-time staff and contractors, is uncertain.

Equally unclear is how this will make significant money – reports suggest around 140,000 users signed up to pay the $8 monthly fee in the brief period it was live. That's just 0.06 percent of the active userbase, some way from the 69m subscribers Musk has said the company can achieve by 2025.

It also remains to be seen who will pay for Twitter Blue, and how appealing they will be to advertisers; internal reports suggest the first wave of subscribers were primarily pornographers, cryptocurrency advocates and overseas accounts, notably from the Middle East. Brands, meanwhile, remain unconvinced, with a reported 50 percent of the top 100 advertisers stopping or pausing spending on Twitter since Musk's takeover.

"THE people have spoken... Vox Populi, Vox Dei," proclaimed Elon Musk after the Twitter users' poll on whether to reinstate Donald Trump and other banned users to the platform.

This is only a partial quotation from the 8th-century theologian Alcuin's letter to Charlemagne – the relevant section reads, in full: "*Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, vox populi, vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit*". This translates as: "And those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness."

Truly it seems we live in a golden age for priapic egotists with a shaky grasp of the classics.

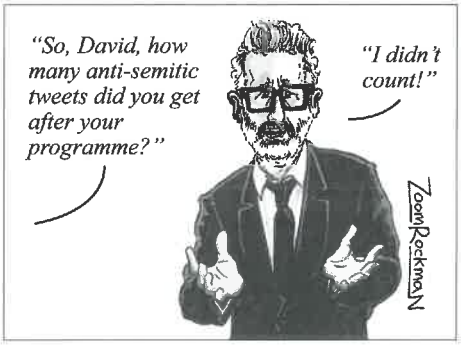
28 October: "Twitter will be forming a content moderation council with widely diverse viewpoints," says Elon Musk. "No major content decisions or account reinstatements will happen before that council convenes."

20 November: Musk restores Donald Trump to Twitter based on a users' poll, with no sign of any content moderation council.

24 November: Musk offers "general amnesty" to suspended accounts with still no sign of a content moderation council

DIGITAL and social media platforms' role in disseminating news continues to grow – new Ofcom research shows that nearly two thirds of UK adults get their news via an online intermediary.

The same report warns that "people who most often use social media to access news are less likely to correctly identify important factual information, feel more antipathy towards people who hold different political views and are less trusting of democratic institutions, than people who use TV and newspapers most often as a source of news." Meanwhile, the 11,000 redundancies Meta recently announced included many employees working in news, including fact-checking and "news integrity". Facebook, owned by Meta, has more than 50m users in the UK, and is the country's third most popular news source.



MUSIC & MUSICIANS

THE vacuity of government "levelling up" claims has been demonstrated once more by the latest blow to Liverpool's cultural life.

Since 1968, Welsh National Opera has been taking shows there as part of a touring programme funded by Arts Council England (ACE). But thanks to a government-directed cut of 35 percent to WNO'S grant, the company has been forced to cancel everything it does in Liverpool forthwith. So much for giving people outside London better access to the arts.

Comparably bad news comes from Cardiff, where the city council is abandoning responsibility for St David's Hall, the jewel in the crown of Welsh classical concert-life, which houses the BBC National Orchestra of Wales alongside big events like Cardiff Singer of the World. But the council won't maintain it any more. The most likely taker will be AMG/Live Nation, an aggressively commercial outfit that runs pop events in large arenas.

AMG makes no secret of its intention to shrink the Hall's classical programme. To that end, it will strip out the seats and make other adjustments to the auditorium that will suit amplified performance but otherwise ruin the superb acoustics – ensuring that classical artists won't want to play there.

Needless to say, Cardiff council is trying to rush the matter through before opposition builds, with a decision to be announced on 15 December. But a campaign has begun to save St David's from a future existence of Abba tribute nights. And if salvation proves impossible, there should at least be a clause in the handover agreement to ensure a minimum number of prime slots for classical bookings, at hire-fees that classical promoters can afford. Anything less, and Cardiff's claims to be a city with a serious cultural life will attract laughter.

MEANWHILE, the fallout from ACE's funding cuts continues, with petitions aplenty, and senior management at English National Opera parading themselves on radio and TV as chief victims – which they are, although the sympathy is generated by memories of what ENO *was*, rather than what it's *become* under their dismal leadership.

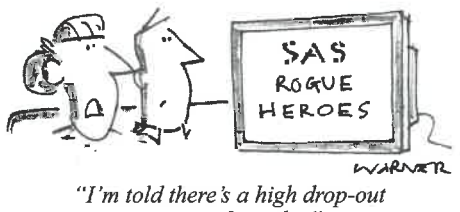
Chief executive Stuart Murphy has been begging ministers to intervene (unlikely while he remains in office). And chairman Harry Brünjes has told politicians that relocating out of London is not a viable option, forcing ENO to shut down next April unless ACE changes its mind.

According to ACE's Darren Henley, who's been doing some parliamentary lobbying of his own, there's no going back on the decision. Last week Henley told us all that removing ENO's funding was not a "cut", however much it looked like one (a statement worthy of Lewis Carroll), while ACE's director of music Claire Mera-Nelson tried to explain why opera had been targeted by saying it was a "no-growth area" – something she doubtless based on data provided by the Audience Agency, a non-profit organisation retained by ACE to gather audience information.

Interestingly, the Audience Agency has just been sacked by ACE, for undisclosed reasons, and replaced with the far from non-profit PWC, which will be pocketing a sizeable £1.6m for its services. What's more, the contract allows PWC to "commercially exploit" whatever data is collected for its own use. A generous deal from an arts body so strapped for cash it has to offload national opera companies.

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

"But what do the public make of this news? Here's a sample of opinions from the kinds of weirdos who hang around town centres during weekdays..."



Letter from **Addis Ababa**

from Our Own Correspondent

EYE WORLD

REJOICE! A cessation of hostilities agreement signed at the start of the month between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray regional state government might just end two years of horrendous if rarely reported violence in the Horn of Africa.

The agreement has been described as an African solution to African problems; but that's an example of our prime minister Abiy Ahmed's way with words: the deal was in fact driven by pressure from the US, which insisted on something in return for pushing the IMF and World Bank to help save Ethiopia's economy from collapse.

Our PM, a strong believer in the evangelical Prosperity Gospel, knew God was on his side. God, that is, and a vast fleet of Turkish, Iranian and Chinese drones, and a much-expanded army; though most of the fighting was left to regional militia or outsourced to the army of our allies and sometime rivals in neighbouring Eritrea. In the end, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), whom we prefer to describe as terrorist rebels, were starved into talks by a government blockade of food aid, medicine, power and other necessities.

Abiy, a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2019, claims the agreement will move Ethiopia forward on the "path of reform" he launched four and a half years ago. But he has warned: "Peace talks often break down after negotiations due to lack of trust and failure to keep promises." Both sides have already started sniping at one other and there's no sign of the Eritrean army withdrawing. Nor is it clear what President Isaias Aferwerki, whose rule over Eritrea predates its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, wants before leaving. It may include $3,000 for every wounded Eritrean and more for the families of those killed.

Abiy may not be a good listener but he's still a fluent speaker. At COP 27, he claimed Ethiopia had planted 25 billion seedlings in his Green Legacy Initiative. He promises our famine-hit land will become food self-sufficient and export wheat by the end of next year. Alas, no one believes him (a "very unrealistic and unachievable target", says the US Department of Agriculture).

Peace in Tigray would of course allow more photo opps for our perma-smiling, impeccably dressed leader, whose supporters claim he has "the enormous potential to change Africa". And we are seeing changes at home, too. In Addis Ababa we have the new Unity, Friendship and Entoto parks with attached riverside regeneration schemes (though the rivers themselves remain open sewers), the national library, and the latest Chinese-built science museum, inaugurated last month. The president has a new $1bn palace being built on the Entoto hills overlooking the city. There are also plans for a new, multi-billion dollar satellite city, unkindly christened Addis Abiyville by the growing ranks of the disaffected.

We wonder who will pay for it all, since Abiy has told the House of People's Representatives the costs didn't concern them. Perhaps, like much else, these projects are mortgaged to his friends in the UAE or Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile rather less is happening to address the more tiresome day-to-day problems of poverty, jobs, housing and inflation.

Peace in Tigray could also allow our leader to turn his talents to our other conflicts. There are clashes between Afars and Somalis, disputes along the borders of the Amhara region, and a low-level insurgency across the Oromo region. There are unresolved problems too with Sudan over the al-Fashaga area, and with our prickly ambitious neighbour President Isaias. Let's hope God really *is* on our side.

TURKEY WATCH

A DOCTOR's first duty is to their patient. But in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey doctors are increasingly in peril.

In 2021, for example, those who spoke out about under-reporting of Covid cases had to surrender their passports and were monitored by police. In 2020, Dr Serdar Küni was jailed for four years for treating alleged members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party after clashes in eastern Turkey. In 2018, when the Turkish Medical Association called for an end to Turkey's military operations in Syria citing humanitarian concern for civilians, Erdogan called its members traitors and "servants of imperialism".

Now, on 26 October, Dr Şebnem Korur Fincanci has been accused of propaganda for a terrorist organisation and degrading state security. Interviewed on a Kurdish TV channel that was covering allegations that Turkey had used chemical weapons against Kurds in Iraq, she reviewed a clip of two people said to be reacting to toxic gases and suggested an independent investigation was needed. She was promptly arrested; and Erdogan himself accused her of speaking the language of a terrorist organisation, and insulting Turkish armed forces and Turkey.

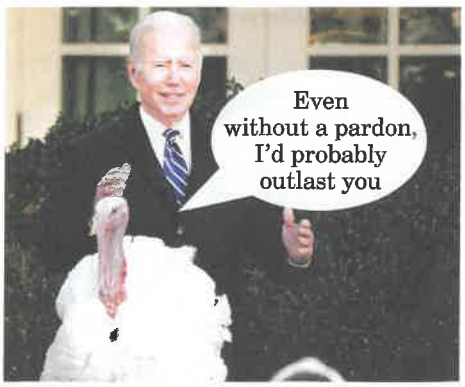
Dr Fincanci has been arrested and charged several times under anti-terror laws. In 2016, after guest editing a Kurdish newspaper for a day, she was charged with terror propaganda, was acquitted but is to be tried again. In 2018, after signing a declaration denouncing human rights violations in the country she was sentenced to 30 months in jail (she has appealed). But the latest arrest may be about more than her TV interview. Dr Fincanci is also chair of the Turkish Medical Association, president of Turkey's Human Rights Foundation and an internationally renowned expert in forensic medicine.

She has investigated mass graves in Bosnia for the UN, and played a pivotal role developing the standards that forensic doctors in Europe, the US and UK rely on when looking for objective proof of torture. This makes her world-famous for her objectivity – but not very popular with her president.

The UN, doctors and medical bodies across the world are calling for her release. But the message for doctors in Erdogan's Turkey is clear: put patients before politics and you'll be coerced, harassed and detained.

'Dr Grim'

BIDEN THANKSGIVING



Myanmar mayhem

RELIEF for the Foreign Office as former British ambassador Vicky Bowman, imprisoned in August on fake charges, was released in mid-November – Whitehall's Myanmar mandarins had feared another Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe drama. But with Bowman safely home, there's growing trepidation inside Myanmar.

Announcing the release of 6,000 people alongside Bowman – very few were political prisoners – the military said it would be working "constructively on nation-building". We know what that means. Successive UN reports document the destruction of our economy, environment and public services as the military tries to seize rural areas under the control of ethnic and democratic groups. Massacres, indiscriminate air strikes and mass arson attacks occur almost daily. East Asia has not seen this order of violence since Cambodia's Pol Pot unleashed the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the 1970s.

In what is now a pattern, on 16 September helicopter gunships fired on a school in Sagaing before soldiers entered the village and opened fire. The UN says 11 children were killed. October saw the worst single airstrike since last year's coup. In another suspected war crime, as many as 80 people were killed when the air force dropped munitions on a music concert in Kachin state.

Surreally, the junta has announced elections for 2023. Civil society groups fear a "coerced deception" in which a nation with a gun to its head is told to vote for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party.

The international community, after decades of failed policies, finds itself back where it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Then, a nationwide uprising was crushed, and elections announced by the military were later annulled after the opposition won. China, fearing instability in its backyard, supported all this, while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus Japan, China and Russia engaged with the generals, undermining western sanctions.

Today, the heads of six UN agencies working in Myanmar – including UNICEF, UNHCR and the World Health Organisation – have angered Myanmar civil society by engaging with the junta, violating a UN stance since the 2021 coup of avoiding official meetings and events with senior officials appointed by the de facto authorities.

The junta has welcomed a USAID official with a mandate to monitor democracy and governance, presumably with a brief for next year's sham event. But while Americans are being allowed in, British diplomats have spent months in Thailand awaiting visas. So how will HMG respond?

There's growing concern that the junta's meddling in multi-donor trust funds, supported by the UK and managed by UN agencies, could give the military access to information on who is distributing and receiving aid. This has raised fears of retribution by the junta as it weaponises humanitarian assistance.

As "penholder" on Myanmar policy in the UN Security Council, the UK is being urged to force a vote on a resolution critical of the junta, even though Russia and China are likely to veto. The UK is also being asked to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. The UK's multi-million-pound support for failed ceasefire initiatives, such as the Joint Peace Fund, is raising eyebrows meanwhile. Moreover, the UK is under pressure to formalise its relations with the democratic National Unity Government and recognise the achievements of the anti-junta forces. After Bowman was arrested, the Foreign Office said it couldn't rock the boat. Now she's out, no one's holding their breath.

NOOKS and CORNERS

THE Three Tuns pub on Alcester High Street in Warwickshire suffered a devastating fire in April 2021. Locals are now increasingly concerned to see the badly damaged roof of the 17th century timber-framed building left open to the elements for a second winter.

Before the fire, the historic former cottage was home to a thriving and much-loved pub, winner of the local CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) pub of the year award in 2020. Local press reports earlier this year noted that fire investigators had been unable to establish the cause of the blaze, partly because the "very poor structural integrity of the building" meant access was unsafe.

Scaffolding has been put up to support the front of the grade 2-listed building, but much of the tiled roof is gone. The building is now open to the sky, so its condition will rapidly worsen. Stratford borough council launched an enforcement case earlier this year, but there's no sign of progress and there was no answer to the *Eye*'s queries about whether anything would be done to cover the open roof for winter.

EXPOSED: the Three Tuns in Alcester

LAST ORDERS: Bradford's New Beehive Inn

PUB lovers in Bradford, meanwhile, warn that the city's last remaining historic pub interior, at the* New Beehive Inn, *is in danger, after the building's owners applied to convert it into offices.

The application was withdrawn after correspondence with Bradford's planning department. This said that no "compelling justification" had been given for the building not to be a pub, given that it was recently listed by Historic England and a substantial part of its significance was down to its intact traditional interior. But a new application is expected soon.

The New Beehive features in CAMRA's National Inventory of Historic Pub Interiors, described as a unique mixture of the original Edwardian space and a 1936 makeover. Since the Victorian fixtures and fittings were stripped out of the Cock and Bottle, the New Beehive is thought to be the last surviving traditional pub interior in Bradford.

● THE **Pelican Inn** in Altrincham, a striking example of inter-war "Brewer's Tudor" pub architecture, has been saved from the bulldozer by a planning inspector who gave short shrift to the arguments for demolition – but it is still at risk.

Owned by pub chain Greene King, The Pelican, a roadside inn, saw trade dwindle in recent years and Covid gave the chain an excuse to sell the extensive site, including a disused motel at the rear, for development.

The Pelican is a rare survivor of pubs designed in the 1920s and 1930s by George Westcott, well-known Manchester architect and one-time lord mayor. Created in Tudor revival style, it has two storeys with gabled attic accommodation and was built from dark red pressed brick with herringbone infill panels and stone dressings. The first floor is extensively half-timbered.

Altrincham-based McGoff Construction acquired the freehold from Greene King on a conditional contract and intended to build a care home and other accommodation. Although not on Historic England's register, the Pelican is locally listed by Trafford council.

McGoff applied to demolish it through an associate company, New Care Ltd. New Care went to appeal after Trafford failed to determine its application within the allotted timeframe. However, planning inspector Samuel Watson claimed that knocking it down would "harm the social and cultural needs of the community". He also considered that the proposed care home and apartments were overbearing and out of keeping.

Planning officers say that despite being "slightly rundown" there is no evidence to suggest The Pelican couldn't be revived as a pub. Trafford & Hulme branch of CAMRA claims Greene King made no attempt to market it as a going concern. "Without such marketing for at least 12 months, it's impossible to say whether the pub is viable," says CAMRA. "To lose it without such a test would be contrary to the National Planning Policy Framework."

Although The Pelican is believed to be structurally sound, vandalism is a growing problem. Ownership has now reverted to Greene King and CAMRA wants Trafford to serve it with a Section 215 improvement notice. Greene King still "strongly believes" the pub isn't financially viable "and hasn't been since before the pandemic." Its future remains in the balance.

THERE was concern in Hull, when part of the interior of the historic* Ye Old White Hart *pub recently disappeared. The pub was the location of the meeting to plot the overthrow of the Catholic governor of Hull, appointed by James II, following the arrival of William of Orange in England in November 1688.

An application for listed building consent to make internal alterations, including the removal of the servery, was refused in 2017 after various bodies, including Historic England, objected. Nevertheless, earlier this year the servery vanished, without any further application for listed building consent being sought.

CAMRA reported the disappearance to Hull council and was initially told the matter was being investigated. It has now been assured the servery has been sent to be restored off-site and will eventually be back. Watch this space.

"Yes, I am a ploughman, but I want seared monkfish with lemon butter on a bed of rocket"

ROUTE & BRANCHES

IF A tree falls in the forest… which road should a timber company use to take it away? It's a question vexing people in Perthshire, who are upset at the routes chosen by forestry contractors to remove thousands of tonnes of timber along small rural roads.

Take the case of the small town of Pitlochry. A nearby conifer plantation in Ballyoukan Forest is ready for felling and its landowner has employed Scottish Woodlands to do the job. The company's forest manager Jillian Kennedy considered eight transport options last year. She dismissed option three which would involve 40-tonne timber lorries driving down Ballyoukan Hill and through East Haugh. She wrote in her report: "Although suitable for light vehicles, the tarmacked access traverses 765m of shared residential private way, with excessive gradients, blind corners, hidden driveways, soft verges, and minimal laybys… The access is structurally vulnerable to HGV usage, directly adjacent to watercourses and does not meet current timber haulage road width standards, particularly at bends… There is no pedestrian pavement, which increases the unsafe nature of this haulage option."

It also noted that the turns on to other roads were narrow and could be "difficult to negotiate" with "limited visibility". This damning assessment made it all the more surprising when Scottish Woodlands told Pitlochry & Moulin Community Council this was its preferred route.

Fergus McCallum, the council's deputy secretary, says Scottish Woodlands has listed two other options. But he told local paper the *Courier* that "the community council has met with Scottish Woodlands a few times and it has come across very strongly that Ballyoukan Hill is the favoured route."

Locals are aghast and have set up a Facebook group, Stop Scottish Woodlands, with more than 400 members. The group says that over a 10-year period, 4,800 loads of timber would be transported down the hill deemed unsuitable by Scottish Woodlands' own inspector. They accuse Scottish Woodlands of wanting to opt for the cheaper option to avoid paying landowners for rights of way.

Scottish Woodlands told the *Eye* it has "commissioned an engineer's report on the only existing road access to Ballyoukan forest", which is the route down Ballyoukan Hill. But technical director Simon Oldham said other options were still being considered: "We continue to look for alternative access options and are currently in discussion with neighbouring landowners."

In nearby Comrie residents have also been fighting a route given permission by Perth & Kinross council which would allow timber extraction from Auchingarrich Forest across farmland and on to a one-track road past rural residences – with no consultation. Fifteen thousand tonnes of timber would be removed in two tranches by Tilhill Forestry, but the first residents heard of this was a letter saying work was about to start. They have managed to stall the route for now, since there are fears the roadworks will contaminate water from a spring which is the householders' water source. One resident told the *Eye*: "This route means lorries will go on a four-mile detour down narrow country lanes and then through the historic village of Comrie. There was no physical site inspection by the council whatsoever."

A Perth & Kinross council spokesperson said: "All planning regulations were followed regarding the formation of a temporary track within the forest and the formation of access to a public road near Comrie… Issues regarding private water suppliers are controlled by specific legislation and are not required to be considered as part of the planning process."

Letters

letters@private-eye.co.uk

Lookalike

Q

Musk

Sir,

Has anyone noticed, as I have, the similarity between the overdressed megalomaniac-alien 'Q' on Star Trek and the new owner of Twitter? Are they by any chance related?

ENA B. SHARP-REES.

Hancock hysteria

Sir,

I'm billing you for a new laptop due to the damage suffered in a coffee meets keyboard incident following the unwrapping of your latest cover. I can't remember the last time I laughed so much. Please keep up the good work.

HARRIET BOSNYAK (MRS).

...I eagerly await the delivery of the Eye and open it immediately to read the cover and have a chuckle. However, when I looked at the cover of Eye 1586, I found myself momentarily rooted to the spot as a wave of unexpected emotion hit me. I then read the first article "Bungle Book", and had to put it down and walk away. Some days later when feeling more settled, I reached p30, read "£35bn failure of Test and Trace" and felt better. I am one of the bereaved families referred to.

Mr Hancock and the other narcissists that were our government during the pandemic will never be held to account for their actions and like many, many others when I read the reports that continue to emerge in the press of their behaviour during that time, and what they are popularised, lauded and rewarded for doing now, I find myself almost raging.

I lost my mother to Covid in her care home in January 2021. I bought her a diary for Christmas. Her sole entry early in the month was "V sleepy difficult to stay awake". It still makes me cry. Unlike Mr Hancock, I can't see her diary being published. Looking forward to future covers.

LINDY ROGERS, Isle of Wight.

Public pain, private gain

Sir,

MD writes: "There is no point in training extra [NHS] staff if pay and conditions are so dire you can't retain them" ("Strike or leave", p14, Eye 1586). There clearly is a point for those who are so keen to privatise sections of the NHS: the major cost of staff training is left to the state sector, while the private hospitals reap the profit of trained staff, and staffing agencies also benefit hugely: they train no one.

CHRIS MILLER, Bristol.

...Number Crunching (p7, Eye 1586) refers to "agency nurses, who get up to £2,500 to fill a single shift". Nursing agencies might be charging up to £2,500 to fill a shift, but the agency nurse working the shift receives a fraction of that.

STEVE HUNT.

Love letter

Sir,

I don't hold much for Tory-style NHS privatisation, however, the comment by Colin Love (Letters, Eye 1586) about private enterprise being dogged by scandal and evading responsibility sent me searching for "NHS healthcare scandals"... You probably remember some, such as the Bristol babies heart scandal and several maternity unit scandals, one of them, in East Kent, exposed quite recently...

I've no doubt it will be a controversial view, but the conclusions of some of the scandal reports seem to indicate that NHS professionals are often part of the problem.

NIGEL CLARK, Sedgefield.

Pilot wails

Sir,

Re the RAF pilot shortage ("Pilot Blight", p15, Eye 1586). Perhaps the Royal Air Force could borrow an idea from our Chinese friends and offer inducements to ex-RAF pilots to train... er... RAF pilots?

TERRY TOZER, Rye, East Sussex.

Turn that light out!

Sir,

Old Sparky is right (Eye 1586) about the need for (and the failure to provide) a proper government campaign to urge the public to save energy, particularly at crunch times. However, I doubt if the public would take much notice given the "Do as we say, not as we do" approach shown by ministers during the pandemic. Many would justifiably suspect, this time round, that ministers and MPs, while telling the plebs to switch off lights and heating, would have their own heating and lighting on 24/7 in their second homes and pass the bill on to taxpayers.

If the government was serious about saving energy, it would be taking steps to ensure that non-essentials, such as the back-lit video advertising screens now blighting so many of our high streets, were switched off at times of peak demand. These, I'm reliably informed, use ridiculous amounts of electricity, just to try and sell us stuff...

MARTIN BROWN, Coventry.

Pumping ironies

Sir,

...Total nonsense about heat pumps ("Keeping the Lights On", p8, Eye 1586). I have one and if it was off for three hours it would come back on when power restored, no probs, and start heating my house. It's a totally normal set up and others' heat pumps will act the same.

More than that, heat pumps are set to heat gradually and for long periods so [it's] likely it would be heating the house steadily over the day and a few hours off in the evening would be fine. (Most heat pump owners have installed them on houses with a basic level of insulation where houses will stay warm with active heating for three to four hours. And many of us are on time-of-use tariffs with settings that avoid running them at peak hours).

Gas boilers do not work in a power cut! Those houses rely on a blast for heating in the evening which will not happen without power – while us heat pumpers will have a nice warm house heated during the day to keep us warm during the evening peak...

RONALD SHARP, South London.

...Old Sparky doesn't make a habit of being wrong, so perhaps there are certain heat pumps that behave as he claims, but I can assure him there are plenty that don't. Caveat emptor.

JOHN WATKINSON.

"No, sorry... the land agents are three doors down"

Hitting the roof

Sir,

Re the letters in Eye 1586 on the possibilities for installing solar panels on farmland ("Rays of hope"). I offer the following alternatives taken from Issue 135 of the excellent [alternative transport] A to B Magazine.

A survey by Connecting Bristol indicates that 53 percent of roofs in the survey area were suitable for some form of solar panels. By extrapolation (which A to B Magazine accepts is simplistic), this may mean that 30m roofs nationally should be capable of fitment with solar panels.

A report from the UK Warehousing Association advises that warehousing provides almost a third of the total commercial roof space in the UK. If fitted with solar panels, this could double existing UK panel capacity. The large car parks seen at shopping malls and similar retail parks could also be roofed with solar panels. All this and not an acre of arable land required. Perhaps the government should do this before covering any farmland?

MIKE BARLOW,

Essex.

Talk is sheep

Sir,

In his letter ("Rays of hope", Eye 1586), Tim Godwin provides rather biased arguments against UK sheep farming. One should not compare sheep meat with wheat or cauliflowers in terms of nutritional value. The former provides high quality proteins and a wide range of micronutrients rather than calories per se. Sheep upgrade poor land resources to food of high nutritional value.

He should also compare economic activities like-for-like: £1.5bn represents the farmgate value of sheep meat, not the whole value of the sector as against a hypothetical value of total activities linked somehow with surfing. For example, if we were to cover Wales or the Borders with solar panels, the loss for tourism would be enormous. Third point, sheep do not "nibble down to the roots UK land". Overgrazing is very much a 1970s issue, nowadays the real risk on the hills is undergrazing.

According to the December 2021 census, there were 22.8m sheep in the UK, not 15m. Sheep meat is only one of the two agricultural commodities where the UK is a net exporter. I stop here...

J.P. GARNIER,
Independent analyst,
Poulaines, France.

More Letters over ☞

Conspiracy corner

Sir,

Having read the review of Alex Jones's "The Great Reset, and the war for the world" (Literary Review, Eye 1586), I decided to have a look on Amazon to see how it was received in the wider world. Out of 2,622 reviews, all but a handful awarded the book five stars. Makes you wonder if it might be a conspiracy.

JANET MEASOM.

... "Toxic schlock" is a well-deserved attack on the odious Alex Jones, but to read that he is a "ranting fatso" made my jaw drop. I know you are working hard to shake off your school dorm and tuck shop reputation, but clearly there is work to do. Does your reviewer favour debagging "fatties" or does a simple wedgie usually suffice?

STEPHEN MOFFAT (skinny),

Buckingham.

...May I be the 3,295th person to write to you advising that the person inaccurately named as "Karl Schwab" in "Toxic schlock" (Literary Review) is in fact named "Klaus Schwab"...

MARTIN KELLY, Glasgow.

...In your review of Alex Jones' latest book ("Toxic schlock", Eye 1586), you dismiss the culture war and those who give it credence. Jones is an amoral grifter, but his nonsense has been allowed to gain traction because mainstream discourse has been undermined by supposedly intelligent public figures endorsing statements that are both absurd and demonstrably false, eg women have penises, all white people are racist, or sterilising kids is "care". The disenfranchised then don't know which set of lying bastards to believe.

BEN EATON, Telford, Shropshire.

Stoking the fire

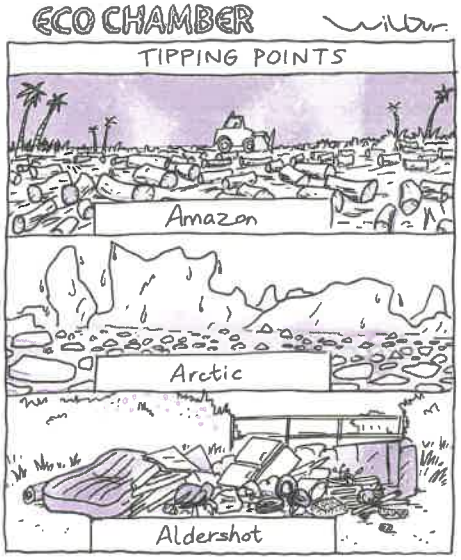
Sir

*I'm sure I can't be the only Eye reader who used to enjoy the regular posts of the contributor to "From the Message Boards" whose signature sign off was the elegant "Come up to Stoke and we'll kick your ******* head in". Imagine my surprise, then, while watching a recent Commons debate on TV, to discover that this excitable northern wit appears to have adopted the handle of "Jonathan Gullis" and now proudly represents Stoke-on-Trent [North] as its Conservative MP! Do you perhaps have a picture of him making a point in characteristic fashion in his new role?*

MIKE HINE, Kingston upon Thames.

■ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** Mr Gullis was one of more than a dozen Tory MPs who publicly named hotels in their constituencies being used to house asylum-seekers.

"My, oh, my, Grandma – what a successful example of keystone species reintroduction you are!"



Toilet humour

Sir,

In my house I have TWO gender-neutral loos. Does that make me "woke"? Oh, I do hope so! It must also mean that the builders of my house 45 years ago were in the vanguard of "wokeness" decades before the rest of us even knew it existed. How astonishingly prescient of them.

ANNA FENN, Plymouth.

Northern exposure

Sir,

Lunchtime O'Boulez (Music & Musicians, p36, Eye 1586) should get a map, or better still should try getting from Manchester to Opera North – which is in Leeds, and definitely not on Manchester's doorstep. Whether ignorance or bias, shame on you.

SARAH KENDAL,

North Wales.

● Lunchtime O'Boulez replies: "So far as opera-going outside London is concerned, Leeds IS on Manchester's doorstep. A good proportion of Opera North's audience in Leeds travel from Manchester; and reciprocally, Opera North tours some of its shows to Manchester. So there's a real and meaningful connection between ON and the city. In any event, my comment that Manchester would neither want nor need ENO to relocate there has now been echoed by ENO's chairman who told MPs last week that moving to Manchester wasn't a realistic option."

Taking back control, Pt 94

Sir,

I have been under the impression that the "waves of immigrants" crossing the Channel are in part due to the relaxed attitude of our neighbours across the Channel. I was therefore surprised to read in Le Monde of 4 November that the problem is instead due to Brexit itself: "Brexit has also made it impossible to apply the Dublin regulation, ie the return of a person who has already applied for asylum in a country of the European Union."

The Dublin Regulation determines which country is responsible for considering an application for protection. An asylum seeker can only have his or her application considered in one of the Dublin countries. The UK is no longer a "Dublin country" having left the EU. "Taking back control"? I don't recall any representative of the UK government mentioning this; can somebody please tell me why?

MICHAEL WAYGOOD.

Absent fiends?

Sir,

Thank you for mentioning Giulio Regeni in Postcard from Cairo (EyeWorld, Eye 1585). Proceedings actually began in Italy earlier this year against four Egyptian nationals (in absentia), accusing them of the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni. However, the court has ruled for the time being that the case be suspended until credible evidence is produced that the four accused are "aware" of the proceedings. Egypt declines to cooperate in making the accused "aware". Egypt should borrow from the Lockerbie case and surrender the four accused to Italy so that justice is seen to be done.

NAME AND ADDRESS SUPPLIED.

Selective memories

Sir,

Regarding "Crimea watch" (Letters, Eye 1586) selectively lamenting the hypocrisy of holding, without complaint, the 2018 Fifa World Cup in Russia, four years after they first invaded Ukraine in 2014, and ten years after they invaded Georgia. Closer to home the 2012 Olympics was held in UK nine years after illegally invading Iraq and Afghanistan, and still embroiled in both, not forgetting preparing for destruction of Libya. Eternal shame of "great" Powers?

BILL MAJOR, Liverpool.

Lookalike

Sloth

Infantino

Sir,

Have any of your other readers spotted the striking familial resemblance between the character 'Sloth' in the cult 80s movie The Goonies, and the upstanding President of FIFA, Gianni Infantino?

PAUL BANDALL.

Commentatorballs

£10 paid for contributions

"It could've been a different game, but look, I'm not standing here saying it could've been a different game"
NATHAN JONES, BBC1

"The crowd are covering their hands with their eyes"
SARA ORCHARD, Radio 5 Live

"They're replacing the assistant referee's battery pack... They'll hope to have him incommunicado soon"
DARREN FLETCHER, BT Sport

"That is the elephant of this game for both teams, both keepers – it's a risk-and-reward scenario"
STEVE SIDWELL, Radio 5 Live

"Saudi Arabia would bite your hand off for a draw right now"
CLINTON MORRISON, Radio 5 Live

Contributors: Damian McAfee, S. Barrett, Kevin Williams, Berenice Baynham, Jeffrey Horwich.

It's not alright, Ma...

Sir,

I first seized an Eye in the Golden Cross pub while studying in Coventry in 1964. It was also the time I became a life-long fan of Bob Dylan. In the 58 years I have enjoyed both, I have never felt the need to shed a tear, as I did, at the unfair, unfunny unintelligible piece in Eye 1586 taking the rise out of my Nobelian hero ("The Philosophy of Modern Song by Bob Dylan", as told to Craig Brown). The brilliant author of pieces on the life of Charles III should have been engaged to carry out the task.

Yours, tangled up in blue,
JIM ARNOLD, Margate.

Pedantry Corner Special

...It would have been obvious to any ex-serviceman that the photo of chancellor Jeremy Hunt displaying his father's medal on the left side is something of a clanger ("Bred Admiral", HP Sauce, Eye 1586). All inherited medals should be worn on the right-hand side, thus honouring the person they were awarded to originally.

MIKE HEMINGWAY, PEMBS.

...I must be the 94th subject to point out that Guy Fawkes and his colleagues were aiming to blow up the House of Lords and not the House of Commons (p29, Ye Daily Terrorgraph, Eye 1585). I would get out more but I've just set fire to my house instead of the bonfire in my garden.

TOM HILBOURNE, Winchester.

...Re "That Trump Father of the Bride Speech in Full" (p27, Eye 1586), surely an American would use the term "ass" not "arse"?

MICHAEL J. HOWARD.

...I've waited years to pedantically correct a pedant and my hour has come. Sorry, John Webster (Letters, Eye 1586). It was Jessie not Joyce Royce Landis who played Cary Grant's mum in North By Northwest.

DAVID McGILLIVRAY, London.

In Olivier's 1948 film of Hamlet, Hamlet's mother is played by Eileen Herlie (born 1918), and her son by Sir Laurence (born 1907).

PAUL LAWLEY, Exmouth.

...In the 1941 film Major Barbara, Robert Morley played the father of the actor Walter Hudd, who was 11 years older than Robert Morley.

NIGEL LEWIS, London.

...In the interests of accuracy I feel compelled to point out that the term "shoot-em-up" is not necessarily equivalent to "first-person shooter" as asserted by Rosina Murray (aged 16, "Shots fired", Letters, Eye 1586). The former is a pixel-based stalwart from the classic video game age of the late 1980s and early 90s, whereas the latter only emerged in the subsequent 3D polygon era enabled by PCs and ever more powerful home consoles. I should know – I've been wasting my time with this nonsense for 30 years. You don't need to employ anyone under 20, it's all fine.

ALAN WARN (aged 45).

...In Eye 1584's "It's Grim Up North London" cartoon (my favourite regular in your esteemed organ), Jez and Quin are making soy candles. They are then shown with the candles, which are traditional pillar and baton free-standing ones. May I be among those pointing out that soy wax is soft and melts too much, and soy candles must be contained in glass? Only beeswax, paraffin wax and palm oil wax can be self-standing and soy wax must be blended with one of those for it to be free-standing.

CAROLE WHITTAKER (MRS)
John O'Groats, Caithness.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

O "Dogue is our mission to change the lives of as many dogs as we can, feeding fresh seasonal quality whole food, one meal at a time," chef Rahmi Massarweh told reporters at his Valencia Street canine restaurant in San Francisco. "Dogue is French for 'mastiff', and this is kind of a homage to my roots in classical French cuisine, and a tribute to the English mastiffs that my wife and I love so much. You know the saying 'you eat with your eyes before you even take a bite', and in regard specifically to dog food, it's always been my goal to make it look as if I wanted to eat it. So here, we serve only fresh whole food for dogs, with bespoke menus to eat here, or for pet parents to take home."

Critics of the canine restaurant have cited it as emblematic of the skewed priorities of a city with rampant homelessness and soaring drug addiction, but Massarweh was unrepentant. "Our three-course tasting menu costs $75. Our pawtisserie serves immaculately crafted pastries, such as the petit gateau cake with shredded chicken and pastured cream, and the red rose with wild antelope heart. This is washed down with a dogguchino, a creamy creation infused with spirulina or charcoal. Dogs are amazing, because what you see is what you get. If they like it, they like it, if they don't, there's nothing you can do." *(Lifestyle Asia, 17/10/22. Spotter: David Dallison)*

– O –

O *"My company offers customers a unique opportunity to participate in their own funeral, and experience the drama of being buried alive,"* *Yakaterina Preobrazhenskaya told reporters in St Petersburg. The 'full immersion' funeral costs £50,000, and includes a religious ceremony, with appropriate music, candles, and the writing of a will, after which you will be buried alive in your coffin for an hour. This is followed by a mandatory revival with a necessary resurrection and an all-around revived awareness of your mission, which will renew your desire to live.*

"The purpose is not morbid, it is a true symbol of fighting for yourself and your own happy future. This is stress therapy for fears and anxieties, that will help you find your psychic abilities. We do not intend to expose our clients to undue risk. Scientists have calculated that the buried person will have enough air in their coffin for about 5.5 hours. I have already received a lot of interest, and am unable to accommodate everyone who wishes to try this full immersion service, but there is also an online version of the therapy, costing only £13,000." (BOL News, 26/10/22. Spotter: David Krassner)

– O –

O "Lovot is the ideal affectionate companion," Kaname Hayashi told reporters at the Groove X building in Tokyo, "one that matches our modern lifestyle. When you help the robot, when you take care of it, it makes you feel happy, like the relationship one can have with a pet cat or dog. It has no other purpose than bringing happiness and the joy of living together. Without physical contact – skinship – it's hard to connect with your robot fully, which is why we created a robot that allows this, thanks to its warmth. I believe Lovot will usher in a new age of emotionally enhanced robotics."

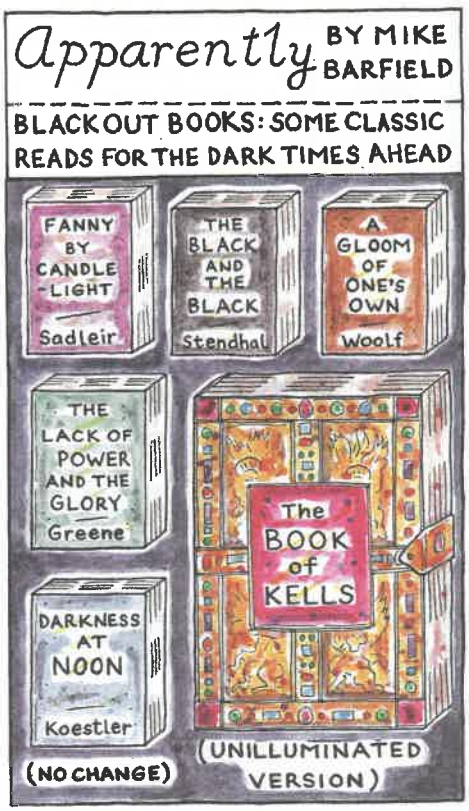
Customers Ai and Hideyuki Shimizu then spoke of the happiness their 43cm-high fuzzy Lovot robot (retailing at just over £3,000, plus a £65 monthly subscription) has brought them. "We were talking about having a pet at first, but our lifestyle is very busy with work. Lovot looks so real, and when we wake up, he is here to greet us. When we take a break from work, or have a meal, he comes to play with us. I used to have a dog before, and I feel the exact same bond with our Lovot. We have named him 'Mon-chan', because of the cute sound he makes. Once he can be equipped with a portable battery, we are planning to take him out of the house." *(Japan Times, 13/11/22. Spotter: Rod Bladen)*

JUST FANCY THAT!

A PHOTOGRAPH of Germany's football team covering their mouths drew worldwide coverage when they protested at being silenced by Fifa's ban on players wearing the One Love diversity armband at the Qatar World Cup.

Less publicised was Germany's other connection with the Qatari organisers. In 2010 the Fifa evaluation group declared itself impressed at Qatar's stadiums masterplan, which was created by architects Albert Speer and Partner in Frankfurt. Leading the work was the firm's eponymous founder, son to Hitler's favourite architect, Albert Speer.

Speer Jnr, who died in 2017, recalled holidaying with Hitler ("a nice uncle, from my childish perspective") but sought to distance himself from his father's legacy and concentrated on sustainability and urban planning. However, by a startling coincidence Speer Jnr drew up the masterplan for the Qatari stadiums, later associated with mistreatment of migrant workers, while his father designed the Zeppelinfeld stadium in Nuremberg used for Nazi rallies.



Rishi Sunak MP The Prime Minister's Top Secret WhatsApp Group

Hi guys! Anyone watching the footyball? I love the soccer, me!

Have you seen my Wallchart?

Penny Mordaunt
Is that the Red Wallchart which shows all the constituencies that you're going to lose? Or the Blue Wallchart which shows all the constituencies that the Lib Dems are going to win?

No, that's unfair, Penny. It's a football Wallchart. For fans of football. Like me. Look at this World Cup vid of yours truly! Go on, it's only fifteen seconds!

Dominic Raab
It's short, slick and superficial. Just like you.

Come on, Dominic. No need to be rude. Just because I'm investigating you for bullying.

Dominic Raab
If anyone calls me a bully, I'll smash their face in.

Ben Wallace
You and whose army?

Dominic Raab
Not yours, obviously, because we've cut it down to nothing and sent all the weapons to Ukraine. Chew on that, you soft tosser! And whilst we're about it, which moron decided to send ambulances to Zelensky as well?

Steve Baker
It'll shorten the queues at A&E, because they'll be in Kherson rather than outside St George's!

Please, guys, we're meant to be professional, accountable and act with integrity.

Suella Braverman
Integrity? Is that an outsourcing company? Do they do asylum applications? Are they cheap?

Ah, Home Secretary. Have you solved the migrant crisis?

Suella Braverman
Not yet.

Oh dear. Who's responsible for that?

Suella Braverman
It's the migrants, they just keep coming over here. And the police can't stop them.

Who's responsible for that?

Suella Braverman
The criminals.

I'm sorry, Suella, it looks like you're responsible.

Suella Braverman
It's not my fault. You appointed me.

Penny Mordaunt
So, it's all Rishi's fault. What are you going to do about it, Prime Minister?

I'm going to act decisively and... fly to the Ukraine, to meet President Zelensky.

Grant Shapps
Good idea, PM. Find out how a country operates with an energy crisis and constant power cuts.

Thank you, Energy Secretary. I'd forgotten that's what you do nowadays.

Thérèse Coffey
He's a great choice for that job. The lights are out and no one's home.

Can't we just give everyone some money? That's what I usually do in a crisis. And people seem to like it. Fork Out to Help Out. I think that was the slogan, wasn't it?

Grant Shapps
Black Out to Help Out, more like!

Jeremy Hunt
Sorry, Prime Minister, I can't borrow anything else.

Penny Mordaunt
You've already borrowed Labour's entire economic policy.

Jeremy Hunt
I have not. I changed the word Labour to Conservative. That's a big change. I'm on a mission to protect the most vulnerable.

Simon Hart
Tory seats in the North! Excellent.

Jeremy Hunt
No.

Simon Hart
Tory seats in the South?

Jeremy Hunt
No. People without any money.

Simon Hart
The whole of the UK? Levelling up! And down.

Thanks, Chief Whip. By the way, how's my flagship planning policy going? Rishinomics in action. New affordable housing all over the country.

Simon Hart
I have to inform you, Prime Minister, that you've changed your mind.

Have I?

Simon Hart
Oh yes. A few of your backbenchers – about 50 – have dropped me a line saying that they're all for new housing, but not in their constituencies. So you've realised that the sensible thing to do is to drop this Bill and announce that there's no time to get it through Parliament.

That's not true, is it?

Simon Hart
You're getting the hang of this Prime Minister thing at last!

Boris Johnson
No, he isn't. He's useless. He's trying to undo my Brexit deal. Sucking up to the EU, who, may I remind you, got Ukraine completely wrong. The Krauts were too cowardly, the Frogs too corrupt, and the Pastamunchers too disorganised. No offence, obviously, to our European friends and allies.

The administrator has warned Mr Johnson for breaching guidelines on appropriate language.

What on earth are you doing here, Boris?

Boris Johnson
I am rebelling against you! Along with Liz Truss! Me and the Trusster! What a team!

Dominic Rabb
The two most useless Prime Ministers in History.

Boris Johnson
Don't speak too soon!

How disloyal can you get?

Boris Johnson
A lot more. This time I'm pretending I care about wind-farms. Next time it could be immigration,schools, universities. There are lots of things I can pretend I care about! But first, an important economic question.

What?

Boris Johnson: I've heard a rumour that MPs can claim for their Christmas parties on expenseroonies. Just wondering if it's retrospective and can be applied to all work events? 2020-2022? Suitcases of wine, cakes, karaoke machines, broken swings, the whole caboodle – charge it up to Joe Public. Bish bash dosh!

The administrator has removed Mr Johnson from the group, for being Mr Johnson.

Nursery Times

Friday, Once-upon-a-time

Keir Starmer WRITES

HELLO!

Welcome to my new column – that is, if you like columns. If not, it can easily be a think-piece, a lifestyle article or an op-ed featurette! Whatever floats your boat. And if you're not keen on boats, whatever floats your pedalo, dinghy or catamaran. And if floating's not your thing, then sinking is absolutely fine with me!

Now that's out the way, and I've made my position crystal clear, I'd like to get on to my main point – which is my utter disdain for Rishi Sunak half-heartedly tying himself in knots in a desperate attempt to please all of the people, all of the time.

Just look at his stance on immigration. He has a ludicrous position of being ANTI immigration whilst at the same time being PRO job-filling from overseas! I, on the other hand, have a completely contrary and more credible stance of being somewhat PRO job-filling from overseas whilst remaining somewhat ANTI immigration.

So you can see the clear difference between us. Rishi is wishy-washy, sitting on the fence and trying to be all things to all men – whereas I am quite clearly resolute and steadfast about my desire to appeal to one and all. I'm sorry, but if you don't like that, then there's nothing I can do. Other than modify everything I've just said into something you'd rather I had said. Like strikes. Of course, I'm fervently in favour of the right to strike. But at the same time, I'd rather you didn't strike, if that's all right with you.

So, whether you're aboard a pedalo, dinghy or catamaran, you can see the clear blue water that lies between me and wishy-washy Rishi. And if you prefer dry land, then who am I to disagree? The important thing is we're all singing from the same hymn sheet – unless you're Hindu, of course, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or Wiccan, or Satanist, or Corbynite, or *(cont. until 2024)*

Sincerely, Keir.

WINTER OF DISCONTENT!

ARMY CALLED IN TO HELP NHS

by Our Health Staff **Dr Foster** *(between 9am and 5pm only)*

THE beleaguered Nurseryland Health Service has been forced to accept the assistance of all the King's Horses and all the King's Men with their emergency care.

Last night, they attended an incident involving a large egg who had tragically slipped off a wall, breaking into many pieces.

Said one onlooker, "Mr Dumpty was in a terrible state. He had had a great fall, and I don't want to be critical, but I am afraid that all the King's Horses and all the King's Men couldn't put Humpty together again."

The officer in charge of the military detachment defended his men's attempt to resuscitate the unfortunate egg, saying, "We are trained more to march up hills and down again, rather than repair fractured shells and perform open-yolk surgery underneath high walls."

In another incident, an old woman who swallowed a fly ended up swallowing one of the King's Horses in an attempt to remedy her gastrological issues.

Said one observer, "I'm no medical expert, but the fact is that she swallowed a horse. She died of course."

HOME SWEET HOME SECRETARY BLAMES JUMBLIES

by Our Immigration Staff **P. Green-Boat**

THE minister in charge of stopping sieves full of jumblies from landing in our Home Sweet Home has blamed the Jumblies themselves for her failure.

Said Cruella de Bravermanston, "If they didn't sail to sea in leaky sieves, then there would be be no problem. They have brought it upon themselves and the fact that they have got green heads and blue hands is neither here nor there."

A spokesman for the Jumblies said, "You think our sieves are leaky. What about her? They don't call her Leaky Sue for nothing."

LUNAR MISSION HAILED AS GREAT SUCCESS

by Our Space Staff **Professor Brian Ox**

A COW has successfully orbited the Moon, paving the way for further exploration of the galaxy in the near future.

Said Moo Mission Controller, the cat with the fiddle, "This is the first step towards sending cattle to Mars and then onwards throughout the entire universe. We can now imagine colonies of cows on Jupiter and herds of bovine settlers roaming the rings of Saturn."

Said Deputy Mission Controller, "Little" Dog, "I, for one, am laughing at the thought that livestock can seek out new worlds, and boldly go where no ruminant has gone before!"

EVIL TROLL ALLOWED BACK UNDER BRIDGE

by Our Social Media Staff **Tweetie-Pie**

THE hideous and offensive troll, who for many years terrorised innocent Billy Goats-Gruff from his secret hiding place underneath the bridge, has been reinstated.

The new owner of the bridge, Mr Elon Muck, said that this was an important moment for freedom of expression and that it was his mission to make sure that everyone was free to be abused by the Troll.

This is a historic day for liberty, as the Troll can go back to saying that the Goats are "libtard,snowflake,paedos" who should be eaten alive by his followers.

XI ANNOUNCES NEW CHINA COVID POLICY

TRUMP ALLOWED BACK ON TWITTER

SCANDAL ROCKS EMERGENCY SERVICES

CABINET SPLIT ON IMMIGRATION

Great football chants to try out in Qatar

I can sing a rainbow *(Trad)*
Somewhere over the rainbow *(Judy Garland)*
Since you've been gone *(Rainbow)*
Singing in the rainbow *(Gene Kelly)*
It's raining bows! *(Weather Girls)*
I can't stand the rainbow *(Tina Turner)*
While my Qatar gently weeps *(Beatles)*

WORLD CUP ROUND-UP

God disowns Morgan Freeman

IN A RARE display of virtue signalling, the Supreme Deity has let it be known that he no longer wishes to be associated with Morgan Freeman, the actor who played him in Bruce Almighty.

"God tries to remain out of politics," said a spokesangel, "and indeed religion, as it just causes too many problems. But on this occasion, he felt that Freeman's appearance in the opening ceremony of the World Cup might have led innocent viewers to believe that God in some way approved of the non-sensical rubbish about peace and harmony that Morgan was spouting for a huge amount of money."

Morgan was unavailable for comment unless he was paid a million dollars.

New Beckham 'One Love' armband

■ David Beckham says: "I love money, and it's important for me not to discriminate where it comes from. It's not up to me to tell people how they should show their financial feelings for me. I'm entirely behind the LTD and PLC community."

THE EYE'S WORLD CUP WAR CHART!

(surely Wall Chart? Ed.)

FREE WITH EVERY ISSUE!

FOLLOW the action of your favourite teams as they clash in thrilling encounters that you don't want to miss. This chart of the noble game will serve as a heart-warming souvenir for years to come!

Highlights include:

Qatar vs England in Doha as the authorities use all their skills to stop England fans wearing rainbow hats and players wearing armbands. Will England reach the knockout stage where they get knocked out by the police?

Iran vs Iran in Tehran as the government sets about beating the Iranian team as soon as they get off the plane. As the whistle blows their families are all shopped to the religious police and locked up.

Morocco vs Belgium in Brussels as the Moroccan fans set fire to cars in celebration at defeating their hosts. Expect fireworks as *(That's enough football. Ed)*

SPOT THE BUNG COMPETITION

Put a cross or crosses where you think the large brown envelopes are located.

Clue: You may need a lot more crosses than you think and quite possibly more than one pen for when it runs out.

How gay conversion therapy works in Qatar

- Invite foreign ministers to be lavishly wined and dined in Qatar for the World Cup.
- Convert them into thinking gay fans are welcome, despite the fact they aren't.
- Have them return home singing the praises of Qatar.
- Er...
- That's it.

WORLD CUP BOOZE BAN

EYE FOOTIE POLL Man U fans

Who do you think is the most fit and proper new owner to return your team to its glory days?

☐ The Emir of Qatar ☐ Elon Musk ☐ Vladimir Putin
☐ Kim Jong-un ☐ Mr B. L. Zeebub of the Hades Corporation

Gnomemart World Cup Special

Worried about how to sneak your illegal lager into the big match? Then you need the...

Beer Beer Belly™

USING the latest reverse camel hump technology, simply strap the **Beer Beer Belly™** to your belly, suck on the flesh-coloured straw and let the good times flow. Qatar's Budweiser Bobbies will be none the wiser!

Price: £20.22 *(beer available at £300 per pint from the Doha branch of Sunny Weatherspoons)*

WARNING: MAY LOOK A BIT OBVIOUS IF YOU'VE GOT A BEER BELLY ALREADY

ME AND MY SPOON

WORLD CUP EDITION

FIFA PRESIDENT GIANNI INFANTINO

Do you have favourite spoon?

No, there are no favourites, and I resent the suggestion that I have received any financial inducements from any national cutlery organisation whatsoever to promote their spoons.

But do you have a favourite?

Qatari spoons are great. But spoons are for everyone. Today I feel a spoon. Today I feel a fork. Today I feel a spork. Spoon? Fork? I don't care – that's how diverse I am. Today, I feel knives are out to get me.

Can you be trusted with the world's spoons?

Look, when I was a small boy I was bullied for only having a wooden spoon, so I know how it feels to be the victim of spoonist attitudes. To have your life ruined by spoonism. And I say to Europe and all its silver spoons – look in your own kitchen drawers before you start rifling through the golden cutlery of the poor Qataris.

Do you think people should be allowed to spoon with whoever they like?

Can't we just get on with the football?

Has anything amusing ever happened to you in connection with a spoon?

I once laughed all the way to the bank when Michel Platini came in to see me with a suitcase full of... *(This interview has been terminated on the advice of top libel lawyers, Carter-Fork, to save our spoon editor from ending up in the soup.)*

NEXT WEEK: *Sepp Platter, Me and My Platters.*

Lines written on the occasion of an historic Supreme Court Judgment

'Twas in the year two thousand and twenty three
That Nicola Sturgeon promised there would definitely be
A new referendum in October of that fateful year
That would bring Scottish Independence ever more near.
To be honest, this came as a surprise to very few,
Since Ms Sturgeon's default position is to announce Indyref2.
Her loyal supporters will no doubt get furious and bitter
And send threatening messages to critics on Twitter.
There is nothing that makes these folk so irate
As to suggest that she has made Scotland a one-party state,
Unless it's to point out that this government is too cliquey and cosy
Or to say that Nicola looks like the wee boy who said "Fandabadozi!"
Or to say that she has become a one-trick pony
And her claims to great leadership are a wee bit phoney.
For, many Scots folk, perhaps even half of them, agree
That this merely diverts attention from the failings of the SNP.
And those Scots who are worried by her plans for health
So that it would somehow depend on your wealth,
Or those who fret about the thorny issues of gender
And whose view of J.K. Rowling is slightly friendlier,
And those who thought that rail, road, ferry, hospital and school
Had not done so well under the First Minister's iron rule
Are all cleverly told that they should not worry –
The only important thing is to get indyref in a hurry!
So she cannily applied to the Supreme Court of the UK,
Asking their Lordships to rule on whether this new poll was OK
And the Supreme Court again, to nobody's great surprise,
Ruled that it was in the UK parliament that overall power still lies.
So Ms Sturgeon declared that this was useful clarification
Of the tyrannical oppression of the great Caledonian nation,
For the canny first minister knew it was Win/Win all along
And, whatever the result, it would place England in the wrong.
So more shouting about colonisers and imperialists and traitors,
More stirring up folk to be ranters and haters
And, guess what? The next general election, whenever due,
She said would act as a vote solely for... yes... yes, indyref 2!!

© William McGonagall 1867

Advertisement

NEW **GNITCOIN**

YES! The *Eye* is delighted to launch its own crypto-currency. GNITCOIN is not only 100% stable and reliable, but will guarantee you enormous returns!!!

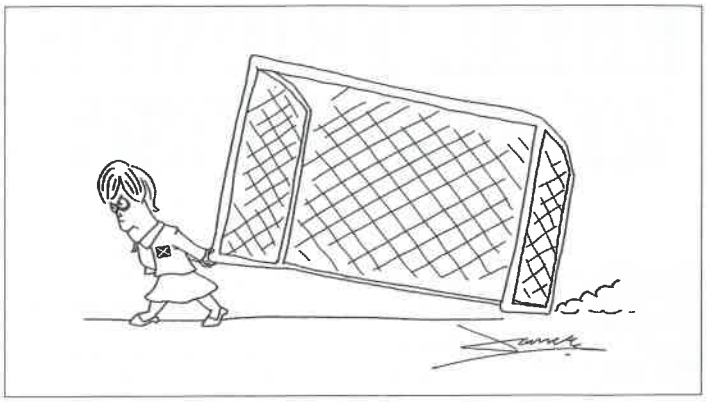
HOW IT WORKS

Don't worry yourself about that. Just invest ALL your parents' money NOW so you don't get financial FOMO about the deal of the millennium!

Send cash, cheques, gold, jewellery or expensive wristwatches to: *S.B.F, My Bedroom, Gnome Towers, Guernsey,* or go to the payment portal *gnitcoinbermuda/notascam.com* and transfer any family assets you can find.

Says Lord Gnome's son, Samuel Bankloss-Friedbrain (17½): *"Before I started selling Gnitcoin it was worth nothing. Now it's worth £94,000,000 and I encourage everyone to pile in behind me and fill your boots. What could go wrong?"*

No questions asked – or answered!



Notes&queries

Everyone is talking about 'Mastodon'? What on earth is it?

● The Mastodons, as any child of the Seventies will tell you, were the mysterious alien race from Mars threatening Earth in the sci-fi TV puppet series *Captain Scarlett Moffat* (1967-1968). With their chilling catchphrase: "This is the voice of the Mastodons", they sought to take over the world and were only thwarted by the efforts of Captain Scarlett Moffatt and her organisation which was called "Specsaver". How many of us can still sing the theme tune as we did in the back of the school bus all those years ago? All together nowæ "Captain Scarlett, she's unwatchable..." Happy days!!

Colonel Iain Stagram, The Face Bookshop, Zuckerburgh, near Fife.

● The good colonel is clearly suffering from battle fatigue! Mastodon was, of course, one of ITV's famous Gladiators, along with Wolf, Wallstreet, Amazon, and Prime. Mastodon was the *nomme de guerre* of former Olympic Modern triathlete Beryl Sheryl, who won bronze in the Moscow Olympics of 1984, excelling in the Equestrian Skiing, BMX Bike Shooting, and Wild Water Golf. With her trademark neoprene gold and purple tracksuit, Mastodon wore roller skates and wielded a nine-foot foam hammer. Sheryl later became Chancellor of the University of Milton Jones and advised the government on the unsuccessful bid to bring the 1999 Olympics to the Isle of Wight.

Reverend Elon Muskrat, Tweeps, Cornwall.

● Oh, for Heaven's sake! Does no one in this country study basic anatomy anymore? The Mastodon is to be found in the central cerebral cortex of the brain between the hippodromus and the temperance lobe, and controls the neurological messaging between the eyebrows. In layman's terms, it determines whether you look cross, quizzical or merely surprised when confronted by external stimuli. Humans are unique amongst primates in possessing a Mastodon and this ability to flex the eyebrow was essential in the evolution of our ancestor, *Homo Scepticus.*

Professor Noah Platform, The Old Firestarter, Kindle, Cumbria.

Answers please:

Why is the River Wye? Does Tik Tok? Does Qatar mean Catarrh in Qatari?

Dictionary Corner

generation [jen-*uh*-rey-sh*uh*n] (*n.*)

1 Period of roughly thirty years to measure the time elapsed between parents and their offspring coming to maturity, e.g. *'This is a once in a generation event'*

2 (*Scottish dialect*) Period of roughly eight years to measure the time between losing one referendum vote and demanding another one. e.g. *'This is a once in a generation event'*

ROYAL TRIUMPH AT STATE VISIT

by Our Royal Correspondents
Rebecca Call and **Robert Hardwork**

AT last, the grey days of austerity are over and the nation's mood has been lifted by an incredible display of traditional British pomp and ceremony.

Yes, it was the Official Visit of Her Majesty the Kate of Middleton to Buckingham Palace! *(Is this right? Ed.)* And the royals certainly pulled out all the stops to show Kate how loved and revered she is by the people of Great Britain.

Wearing the late Princess Diana's very own Lovers' Leap Tiara Boomdeeay, Princess Kate looked radiant, as she graciously met someone or other from somewhere before being escorted to a State banquet in her honour.

There, she dazzled in her pure white designer gown by Jenny Flex with a diamond brooch by top jewellers Baddiel and Skinner. All eyes were on the Princess of Wailsofdelight, as she shimmered through the crowds and charmed the King of England and his Queen Consort, putting them at their ease.

And as for the person from wherever it was – she made him feel extra special and almost as if she was actually interested in anything he had to say about anything.

Let's be honest, it was Kate's night and she stole the show, as well as the nation's hearts and all the front pages. God bless you, Kate, and all sales off the back of you!!!

ON OTHER PAGES

● Where was jealous Meghan on Kate's Night of Glory? Skulking the night away in her luxury mansion in California, watching television instead of getting on with the tough job of looking marvellous and cheering us all up instead of writing dreary self-pitying whinge-fests of so-called books and podcasts **p94**

Owen Paterson Vows To Ignore Ruling

by Our Westminster Correspondent
Ira Onikk

DISGRACED former Tory MP Owen Paterson has vowed to ignore any ruling he receives from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

"I am suing the British government in the ECHR over parliament's ruling last year that I broke lobbying rules," said the cretin. "And If the ECHR rule in my favour, I am duty bound, as a Brexiteer, to ignore them and side with the British government's ruling that I am a monstrous sleazebag."

The arch Brexiteer insisted that parliament has to be sovereign and the final arbiter at all times, insisting he stood full square behind the findings of the parliamentary inquiry that'd he'd breached the MPs' code of conduct.

"Owen Paterson running off to Brussels like a Remoaner, wanting to overturn parliament's ruling, whingeing that his 'rights were infringed' and his 'good reputation damaged' disgusts me," said Owen Paterson. "You lost, get over it."

Members of the ERG unanimously both backed and condemned Owen Paterson's right to take his case to the ECHR, with Mark Francois's head exploding.

I'M A CELEB TOAD LATEST

Christmas Advert
AN APOLOGY

WE WOULD like to apologise for the annual Private Eye Christmas Advertisement, which has been running on Britain's television screens since early September.

In our desire to produce a heartwarming and moving piece of seasonal entertainment, we inadvertently filmed a scene of ordinary people having a nice time, sitting around reading the Christmas issue of Private Eye. At no point did we suggest Christmas is a wretched time of alienation, family tragedy, and almost unimaginable suffering for the vast majority of the population. This appalling omission is deeply regrettable.

We now realise, having seen everyone else's Christmas adverts, that our attempt to merely flog you our product on the grounds you might like it was in deeply poor taste, and we should instead have filmed a scene of monochrome misery, in which an unemployed Santa has to sleep rough on the streets and has only a discarded copy of Private Eye to keep him warm, meaning he freezes to death mourned by a weeping Rudolph.

Merry Christmas to you all.

"Grrr! Look at the Joneses with their heating on!"

Wine can hold back dementia

By **Phil Glass**

Scientists this week announced the sensational finding that drinking wine can help stave off dementia.

In news that will cheer the hearts of many, a simple daily intake of red or white wine, whichever is nearest really, can extend your working life whatever time of day you choose to imbibe it. Cheers!

The boffins have revealed that wine, if consumed in the right quantities, is fantastic for your memory. It contains a flavonol called myricetin which has virtually no taste. Or at least not in this Australian Chardonnay. Bottoms up.

Apparently wine contains a flavonol called myricetin which has virtually no taste. Might just open that Merlot to see if I can spot it in a red. Nope! Itsh not there either. But in the intereshts of journalishtic enquiry, let's shee if you can taste it in a rosé. Hmm. Hard to shay. Anyway, where was I? What wash thish study about? Oh yesh. Booze containsh a flavricetin called myonol or shomething, and is good for shomething...

(continued for 94 bottles)

GAMBLING LATEST

NHS sees 42% rise in demand for treatment linked to gambling addiction across England

Those odds in full

Gambling addiction continues to rise:..... **EVENS**

Gambling adverts continue to increase:.... **EVENS**

Gambling companies continue to tell gamblers to gamble responsibly:.. **EVENS**

Gambling companies continue to lobby MPs:.. **EVENS**

Government does something about it:..... **5000-1**

The Eye's Controversial New Columnist

The columnist who has been to the crèche of real life and the nursery of hard knocks

This week, I am very angry at all this fuss and attention given to the eight billionth person born in the world. Yet again, we see it just happens to be a baby, which is of course sinister messaging by the globalist mainstream media to blame babies for world overpopulation. Speaking as a baby *(see photo)*, I have to ask why is it always us who are chosen to represent how many people exist on Earth? Why couldn't it be, for example, a 40-year-old photocopier repairman named Keith? This sinister attempt to blame a single section of the community for everything is demagoguery of the worst kind, and I think I smell the day-old nappy stench of wokeist remainer liberal elites behind it. If anything, I am a leading proponent in the war against over-population. I have many solutions that I implement on a daily basis, like leaving toy cars at the top of a flight of stairs, and keeping my parents up all night so they are more inclined to murder one another at the drop of a *(cont. p94)*

CAMILLA TO HAVE 'COMPANIONS' INSTEAD OF LADIES-IN-WAITING

COP27 CLOSES WITH PLEA TO END WORLD'S RELIANCE ON FOSSILS

CONSPIRACY UPDATE

CRYPTO CURRENCY SPECIAL

There's been an ominous silence from a lot of you this week, which means either the aliens have finally taken every one of you back to their home planet, or a lot of our contributors have had to sell their computers to pay for their losses on crypto!

Truthteller455@$% has sent me a text:

"I do NOT understand where my money has gone. Sam Bankman-Fried is a ROGUE GENIUS with CRAZY HAIR who BRILLIANTLY bought a company without the funds to pay for it. How could this go SO wrong?"

He continues:

"I am texting this because I can't tweet at the moment. My Twitter account seems to have disappeared. I do not understand where my Twitter has gone. Elon Musk is also a ROGUE GENIUS with crazy hair who BRILLIANTLY bought a company without the funds to pay for it. How could that go SO wrong???"

GLOBALISTWARNING43 has a similar story:

"I invested all my money in Crypto to stop the JEWS from controlling my cash. I should have seen it coming. Sam Bankman-Fried is an obvious made-up name!!!! The signs were ALL THERE TO SEE!"

He adds:

"Look closely at the name: SAM (short for Semite) BANKMAN (Banker) and FRIED (Fried). Translation: I am a JEWISH BANKER and I have FRIED your assets. They tricked me and all decent law-abiding anti-Semites into taking crypto so they could destroy it and the savings of anyone who tries to break their GLOBALIST MONOPOLY!

"I am disappearing now, which I hope will be seen as a defiant blow struck against GEORGE SOROS and not a way to avoid telling my parents I've spent their life savings on a PICTURE OF A COIN."

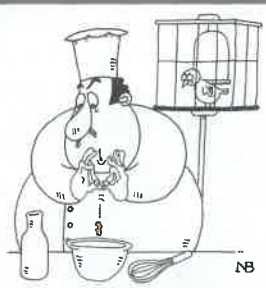
Interesting thoughts from both Truthteller455@$% and GLOBALISTWARNING43 there!

The mystery continues...

NEW OLD SAYINGS

"You can't make an omelette because there aren't any eggs"

(Brewer's Phrase and Fable 2022)



BIBLICAL TIMES

Friday 2 December 2022

Noah 'welcomes the lifting of hosepipe ban'

By Our Flood Correspondent Olive Branch

Local man Noah says he welcomes the decision of Galilee Water to end its hosepipe ban, after a record twenty-three days and nights of rain.

"Obviously they were right be cautious at first, after just one week of never-ending rain falling," said Noah, speaking from his Ark. "But in his revelation last night, St John Kettley prophesied that this rain would go on for forty days and forty nights."

Noah also defended his policy of discharging sewage into local floodwater, as he had loads of animals on board. "Shit happens," said the God-fearing *(cont. p94)*

How is the Queen now?

THE GNOME'S ASTROLOGER **HORACE COPE** FINDS OUT

WELL, luvs, I'm glad to tell you all that Her Majesty is still enjoying heaven! She tells me it's lovely finally to sit back, put her feet up and catch up on all the telly she missed while she was opening biscuit factories and launching ships!

I'm sure you've heard that Her Maj is a big fan of *Line of Duty*. She much prefers it to the *Crown*, if you catch my drift!

To tell the truth, between you and me, Her Maj likes *Line of Duty* because all they do is collar other policemen! They don't waste their time investigating nonces, or dodgy bags of cash from shady foreigners, or anything like that! It's so relaxing for her!

Anyway, if you want to know what other telly the Queen is watching in her Heavenly palace, ring my premium rate Maj line and I'll tell you all about it! Calls cost eight quid a minute, so make sure you've got enough money in that account where you stick your pension!

NO 10 RULES OUT E.U. DEAL IT HASN'T BEEN OFFERED

by Our Europe Correspondent **Toby Lerone**

DOWNING STREET has rejected out of hand Britain adopting a Swiss-style agreement with the EU – a deal which Brussels has never offered us.

"I want to make it very clear to the nutters on the ERG who control my fate that I will never accept a Swiss-style deal from the EU, despite Brussels never offering us that," said a furious Rishi Sunak.

"I remain steadfast in my opposition to any deal to restore frictionless trade with Europe, but only after I float that deal to a friendly Sunday paper and see how quickly the ERG confirm I will be removed as Prime Minister if it goes ahead.

"I am determined to make Brexit a success, instead of it being a total disaster as it is now, by it somehow becoming an enormous success, as we bask in Brexit's glorious sunlit uplands."

A spokesman for the EU quietly wept, begging for the madness to stop one day, adding, "Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries."

What You Missed

Mastermind

BBC1

Myrie: Your name please.

Braverman: Suella Braverman

Myrie: Your occupation?

Braverman: Home Secretary.

Myrie: And your specialist subject: the life and career of Suella Braverman 2021-2022. And your time starts now. How did you become Home Secretary?

Braverman: Er… Er… Er…

Myrie: Why did you lose your job as Home Secretary?

Braverman: Er… Um… Er…

Myrie: How did you become Home Secretary again a week later?

Braverman: Er… Er… I'd like to invite any colleagues if there's anything they want to add.

Myrie: As Home Secretary, what do you always do with the buck?

Braverman: Pass.

Myrie: Correct.

(Beep! Beep! Beep!)

Myrie: I'm afraid your time is up.

Braverman: I've heard that before. You can't get rid of me that easily.

FRIENDS RALLY TO RAABID

by Our Political Correspondent **John Bully**

FRIENDS of the Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raabid today defended his record as a minister, saying, "For 90 percent of the time Dominic is charming and even-tempered and only for 10 percent does he lose his temper and shout and swear at people."

They continued, "That's not so bad, is it? He's like one of those lovely pit bull terriers that you read about in the papers. They are loyal and friendly and lovable, except for that 10 percent of the time when they turn on you and bite you in the nuts.

"That is no reason to have them put down, is it? So why would you want to sack Dominic just because on very few occasions he loses control over something irrelevant, froths at the mouth and savages everyone within gnashing distance?"

One added, "Everyone loves Dominic. I am not saying this because I am scared that he is going to attack me and sink his teeth into my ankle. No, he has only done that once and I was barely in hospital at all. Down, Dominic! Bad Dominic! Help!!!"

US GUNMAN GOES ON SPREE IN WALMART

"Yeah, well – shit happens"

Royal airforce denies preparing new display team

FOLLOWING the allegations of abuse and inappropriate behaviour, an RAF spokesman has denied that a new team has been formed called The Black Arrows, named after their uniform and operating out of HMP Wandsworth.

"This is complete nonsense," he said. "There is not truth at all in the rumour that the Black Arrows will be putting on a dazzling display at His Majesty's Pleasure for nine months, with time off for good behaviour, in which they move up and down the exercise yard of Cell Block H in perfect formation."

He continued, "They are definitely not working on a dazzling display where they all get their lunch at precisely the same time from the prison canteen, then sit at exactly the same table by themselves and don't make eye contact with the other inmates."

He concluded, "There are no criminal charges, so the Red Arrows will remain as the Red-Faced Arrows and these silly rumours should be shot down immediately in a plume of coloured smoke."

School news

St Cakes was delighted to host the former UKIP leader Mr Nigel Farrago to address the Sixth Form Very Conservative Soc last week. The Secretary, Mosley Minor, welcomed Mr Farrago to the Enoch Powell room, where he was greeted with a traditional rousing rendition of the school's 1930s anthem (since banned), *Küchen Uber Alles*. Pupils were delighted by Mr Farrago's views on such varied topics as immigration, immigration and immigration, and showed their appreciation for his talk by raising their right hands to ask him questions and shouting enthusiastically at pupils from the local state school who had *(cont. p94)*

EXCLUSIVE TO ALL PAPERS

WILL THIS WEEK'S MASS SHOOTINGS IN A WALMART IN VIRGINIA AND A COLORADO GAY CLUB MEAN THAT FINALLY, DESPITE NOTHING HAPPENING AFTER THE LAST MASS SHOOTING AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT AND THE ONE BEFORE THAT, THIS TIME SOMETHING WILL BE DONE TO CURB GUN USE IN AMERICA?

No.

THOSE GOVERNMENT TIPS FOR SAVING ENERGY IN FULL

- **Don't** put the heating on
- **Wear** lots of clothes
- **Don't** wash your clothes
- **Don't** have baths
- **Don't** take showers
- **Don't** use your oven
- **Turn off** your freezer
- **Don't** live in a house
- **Live** on the streets
- **Don't** ask us for money
- **Ask** other people for money
- **Er**... That's it.

The Big Ronaldo TalkTV Interview

CRISTIANO RONALDO meets PIERS MORON

Ronaldo: Great to have you on the show, Piers.

Moron: Thanks very much.

Ronaldo: Now, let's be frank, Piers, you're paid an awful lot of money and you're simply not delivering.

Moron: Yeah, it is a waste of my talent. I'm used to performing in front of big crowds and being the centre of attention. Now, I'm just watching from the sidelines and I don't like it.

Ronaldo: Are you fed up with the management? Do you think Rupert's useless? Go on – get yourself into trouble.

Moron: Look, I owe Rupert a lot, from the beginning of my career, but now it's just not working.

Ronaldo: Would you like to move on?

Moron: Of course, but I'm tied by this contract.

Ronaldo: How would you feel if Rupert sacked you tomorrow and then sold News Corps to the highest bidder?

Moron: I think that would be best for all concerned.

BRITAIN'S GOT TALENT SHOCK

by Our Britain's Got Talent Correspondent **Brendan Circuses**

SIMON COWELL has expressed outrage after judge David Walliams was forced to quit after a recording came to light of him saying offensive things about the contestants.

"The Britain's Got Talent contestants, 'whatshisname who did the Opera', 'her, you know the one who could sing a bit but looked weird', 'the saddo teen with the dancing dog' and 'the fat bloke who jigged about', deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," said a clearly furious Cowell.

"These contestants have given the British public such entertainment and, more importantly, given me three superyachts, villas in Miami, Ibiza and the Seychelles, and a gold Bentley.

"When I was informed what Walliams had said, I was stunned, though given all the Botox I've had, that is pretty much my only expression these days.

"Will David Walliams be missed as judge? That's a no from me."

From The Message Boards

Members of the online community respond to the major issues of the day...

Sperm donor row

i litrally live for bants 👍 always's lookin for way's to take the banter to the next level 👍 shout out to the geezer from derby who went on the itv this morning show 👍 67 year's old, 129 kids, GB record 👍 WHAT A LAD – ***bantman***

No payment, just petrol money. Does the business in his van outside the person's home and drops it off, so no surprise that the HFEA have "warned" people not to use his services. Respected figure on platforms for GENUINE people away from the venal and corrupt institutions of the fertilisation establishment. – ***Red Pillar***

REALITY CHECK: This man was exposed on the Sperm Squad chat group (and subsequently in the national press) as a self-proclaimed fascist and senior member of the New British Union, which promotes 'total Aryanism' and venerates Oswald Mosley. – ***Just the facts ma'am***

Are you suggesting that fascism is hereditary? Oswald Mosley was a Labour MP for Smethwick (which turned racist when the Tories took it years later). His anti-Semitism was not widely accepted in the Labour party at the time, so he became a fascist. His son Max started as a fascist but then adopted progressive ideas such as muzzling the tabloid press. People change and so do ideas, such as eugenics, which started with highly intelligent, well bred, cultured people but ended up being abused by uneducated louts like Hitler. – ***Ros Beaney***

I'm suggesting his procreating is motivated by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which believes the white race is under threat. – ***Just the facts ma'am***

not bein funny but aint all sperm white? – ***Hayley 321***

Says he's an airyun but he's bald as a coot 😀 – ***Danny Daz***

Greetings and Facilitations! My most regal lawyers dispute Untrue donors whom claim they father more child's than the most honorable and wealthy gentle Man from Nigeria with given name Adebamgbe meaning Royalty Dwells With Me. My pleasure is to offer ladies exclusive appointments with Personal Intimate Transaction service at my apartment in Royal Kennington during my forthcoming Legal and Business Visit to London Town, with famous garuantee to shire only male child's of noble deposition. BUT if it so pleases I can perform in van outside home according to local custom. I offer exellent virile royal seed's, NO NAZI GENE ONLY MOST ROYAL GENE minimum yield 100 males. – ***The Honorable Adebamgbe Okonkwo***

come back to me when you nock up 200 bird's a year in walsall mate. 15.283cm cock. no charge no string's. pm 4 detail's – ***the sperminator***

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam
Tuan Tuan, giant panda

So. Farewell
Then Tuan Tuan.

You were gifted
To Taiwan by
China in 2008
As a symbol
Of friendship.

Now, alas,
Like that friendship,
You are no more.

And the next present
They will send to
Taiwan will be a
Ballistic missile.

Bye bye,
Tuan Tuan.
And everyone else.

E.J Thribb
(17½ days till invasion)

"I understand you want to give away most of your £105bn fortune, Mr Bezos"

LATE NEWS

- Jeff Bezos donates $100 million to Dolly Parton's charity.

LATE LATE NEWS

- Dolly Parton's neighbour mysteriously disappears as Dolly says, "Amazon package never arrived."

DIARY

WINIFRED ROBINSON: If you cast your mind back to the run-up to Christmas last year, we had the Omicron variant to worry about and there were also countless supply problems. And this year, there's literally no end to the worries facing us all, what with galloping inflation, rising interest rates and soaring energy costs. So how will this affect your Christmas? The experts predict you'll be pretty miserable. Call You and Yours to tell us how you plan to cope.

Joyce Grimwood is in Sheffield. Tell us what you have planned for your Christmas celebrations, Joyce.

JOYCE: I'm in the hospitality industry, so I'll be working over Christmas.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: That's sad, Joyce. That's desperately sad.

JOYCE: Oh, no – I like to keep myself busy. It's lovely seeing the smiles on all those faces.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: But bookings must be down, and that must be very depressing.

JOYCE: We're fully booked, I'm delighted to say.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: Let's hope there's no danger of overcrowding. I'm guessing that you must be having sleepless nights about double-bookings. And what if the food runs out, or there's an emergency power-cut due to unforeseen circumstances? Undercooked turkey can be highly dangerous, and no-one wants to spend their Christmas attached to a drip in A and E, do they?

JOYCE: Oh, we're not worried about that! We'll all be having a very happy –

WINIFRED ROBINSON: Let me bring Keith in, from Romford in Kent. Tell us how this Christmas compares to last, Keith. Is it, sadly, a lot worse?

KEITH: Not really. Pretty much the same.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: But are you having to tighten your belt?

KEITH: If need be, I will. That's only sensible.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: But, as we all know, Keith, that comes with very real dangers. In the past, we've heard from listeners who've tightened their belts just three or four notches, and it's led to severe stomach cramps and even internal bruising. Are you taking all the necessary precautions, Keith – or would you prefer to be a burden on our already hard-pressed health service?

CALL YOU AND YOURS: HOW SAD WILL YOU BE THIS CHRISTMAS?

KEITH: Obviously, I'll be sure not to make my belt too tight. Or I'll just buy another belt!

WINIFRED ROBINSON: But of course a lot of our male listeners won't have that option. Retail experts tell us that the cost of men's belts is going through the roof. And that's if you're lucky enough to have a roof. Let's turn now to Jane Goodright from East Bromwich. With the cost of living soaring, Jane, and all of us feeling the pinch, what do you plan to eat for your main meal this Christmas? Fish fingers? Tinned soup? Toast?

JANE: Thanks for having me on! We're planning to spend our family Christmas in a five star hotel in Morocco. So we'll probably be eating some very exotic dishes! Can't wait!

WINIFRED ROBINSON: You'll be expecting travel misery, with delayed flights, lost luggage, endless queues, extortionate parking charges, and so on and so forth. My heart goes out to you, Jane, it really does. And of course your struggle for some form of financial compensation from the airline company could take literally months, to the detriment of your mental health. It's not something many of us would be prepared to go through, Jane. Frankly, I think you're very brave.

Let me now bring in Martin Satterthwaite, from the Federation of Master Bakers. Martin, do you have projected figures for estimated deaths this year in British households from horrific tragedies involving mince pies and Christmas pudding?

MARTIN: Er, no.

WINIFRED ROBINSON: Some might describe that as a cover-up. The fact remains that over-consumption of unhealthy foodstuffs during the Christmas period is, very sadly, a contributing factor to our tragic annual death-toll. And tell me, Martin, where does your organisation stand on an all-out ban on the placing of coins in Christmas puddings, now that we know it can be fatal?

MARTIN: Well, I –

WINIFRED ROBINSON: Sadly, polls suggest that six out of ten people think that four out of ten people believe that up to seven out of ten people can no longer understand the eight out of ten polls are telling them, forty percent of the time.

But now for some heart-warming news. Despite increasing pressure from climate change, inflation, soaring energy costs, Brexit, Covid, strikes, the war in Ukraine, the crisis in our NHS, a global pandemic of potentially deadly coins in Christmas puddings and mortgage rates going through the roof, we hear from one listener who hopes to have a cup of tea with a neighbour sometime in the near future, weather permitting.

But first let's hear from Cheryl Stoppard in Andover. Cheryl, I understand your pet dog has just died. That must be heartbreaking, particularly at this time of year, in the run-up to Christmas.

CHERYL: No, Scamps is very well, thank you – barking and running about!

WINIFRED ROBINSON: So, could I ask you, how old is Scamps?

CHERYL: Just turned ten years old!

WINIFRED ROBINSON: So, sadly, not many Christmases for Scamps to look forward to. It can't be long before the kindest option will be to put her out of her misery. Does that worry you at all, Cheryl? And if there's anyone else out with an ailing dog, cat, guinea-pig or goldfish, the lines are now open so do please call us on You and Yours. We'll be happy to hear from you.

As told to
CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER

YOU DON'T NEED TO WEAR A MASK ON FLIGHTS ANY MORE. THE AIRFLOW GETS CLEANED AS IT CIRCULATES...
I KNOW YOU'RE TIRED AND NOT FEELING YOUR BEST, BUT THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE'VE FLOWN FIRST-CLASS FOR YEARS. LET'S MAKE THE MOST OF IT.
I KNOW, BUT WHAT WORRIES ME IS...
SHH! COME ON, TAKE YOUR MASK OFF, RELAX AND DON'T WORRY... THEY'VE GOT REALLY GOOD POWERFUL FILTERS THESE DAYS...
THEY CAN LIVEN UP YOUR FACE BEAUTIFULLY...
CLICK

Literary Review

For Reacher, for poorer

No Plan B
Lee Child and
Andrew Child
(Bantam Press, £22)

NO PLAN B might be seen as a smug title, since Lee Child has a Plan B and the book is part of it. Tired, bored or out of ideas after producing a yearly Jack Reacher novel since 1997, he revealed a while back that he intended to retire. His exit, though, would only occur after four transitional thrillers co-written with his brother, Andrew Grant (duly rechristened), an apprentice due to take sole control of Lee's titanic hero in 2024.

This is the penultimate joint effort and, like the previous two, it's inauspicious as a foreshadowing of the series' future. There's a Reacher formula, and in novels preceding his "I'm off" announcement, Lee tested fans' loyalty by deviating from it. Instead of again showing the wandering avenger turning up in a random American place, immediately discovering some lethal racket and beating up a procession of racketeers, his maker sent him to Europe, for example, or back into a past where (unlike the present) he had a home, a job, a girlfriend and possessions.

The Brothers Child books, by contrast, double down on the series' staple features: when two such elements (Reacher spots serious crime, p13; gets into a fight, p24) are ticked off absurdly early as the recipe requires, it's as if the preposterousness and predictability are for reassurance; a winking in-joke.

There's just one innovation, and it's a disaster. Reacher normally stars in every scene of Lee's solo novels, but in *No Plan B*, subplots break up and slow the narrative as he follows clues from a Colorado town (where he saw a woman's murder) to a Mississippi prison. The subplot protagonists are punishingly dull and steal much of the novel from the man for whom the punters have shelled out.

However, punters also shell out for violence, and in terms of quantity they can have few complaints here. The novel contains a dozen fight scenes, and Reacher – clearly descended from the westerns' roving, do-gooding gunfighters, but one who eschews guns – biffs an average of two goons into unconsciousness per bout. But for all their gratitude that no-nonsense old Reacher has been restored, even devotees may start to wonder about his invincibility.

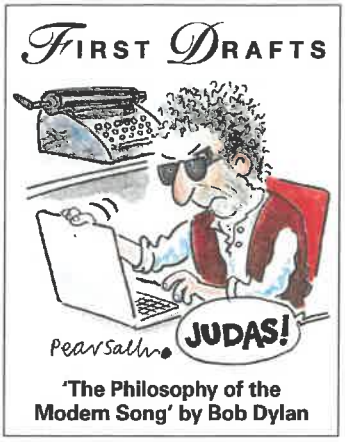
The peripatetic pugilist is now 62 after all, is never shown doing any training yet here performs superhuman feats of fighting, agility and recovery (as when a collapsing fire escape concusses and crushes him, but Reacher – about the size of England rugby player Courtney Lawes, but 30 years older – still clambers from a window on to his hotel roof later the same day).

As an action hero whose adventures still top bestseller lists, Reacher is something of a last man standing: spies now outnumber soldiers in international thrillers, while protagonists who solve crimes instead of bashing or bumping off villains are in the ascendancy in domestic ones. But as an oldster with plausibility problems, created by a sexagenarian author, he's far from being alone.

Of reliable producers of top 10 crime bestsellers – all of them safely installed in 2022's pre-Christmas charts – David Baldacci, Michael Connelly and Ian Rankin are, like Lee Child, in their 60s, and Stephen King and James Patterson are both 75 (Dan Brown is a mere 58, but publishes irregularly and not since 2017). Along with questions about sustaining creative energy and familiarity with current criminal and policing MOs, there are Reacher-style issues of elderly series heroes. Connelly and Rankin have had to contrive elaborate pretexts for their sleuths, Bosch (71) and Rebus (75), remaining semi-operational.

Members of this elite produce guaranteed *annual* top-sellers (and some churn out three or four books a year), whereas their literary fiction counterparts manage a novel every few years that may or may not sell. As they're faced with the looming prospect of these ageing author "brands" reducing productivity or even retiring, you can see why desperate publishers might accept arrangements as awkward as Andrew Child's apprenticeship. At least the income stream will still be there a bit longer, even if it steadily dwindles along with the series' credibility.

The cover of *No Plan B*, though, scarcely bespeaks confidence in that post-Lee future. "Lee Child" is in giant letters, "Andrew Child" (far from building him up as heir) in sheepish tiny ones that fade into the backdrop. That suggests Lee will still be the jackets' biggest name long after he's gone, rather in the way "Robert Ludlum" continues to dubiously dominate the covers of other writers' Jason Bourne potboilers 21 years after his death.



'The Philosophy of the Modern Song' by Bob Dylan

BOOKS & BOOKMEN

■ A MONTH ago Bookworm noted the dominance of independent publishers in literary prizes, from Bloodaxe's Hannah Lowe winning the last ever Costa book of the year award, to Sort Of Books' Shehan Karunatilaka netting the Booker prize (*Eye* 1585).

Uncannily, with no sign of a corporate comeback, November saw the pattern of indie triumphs continue: Faber took the Baillie Gifford prize for non-fiction for Katherine Rundell's John Donne biography *Super-Infinite*; Fitzcarraldo (also publisher of 2022 Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux) won the Goldsmiths prize with *Diego Garcia* by Natasha Soobramanien and Luke Williams; and Influx Press's Percival Everett emerged from a shortlist containing four Penguin Random House authors to take the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Fiction with *The Trees*.

■ THE latter was a strange choice, given that the comedy of *The Trees*, described variously by reviewers as "grotesque", "horrific" and "twisted", is hardly in the lighthearted spirit of PG Wodehouse, as the prize stipulates.

But perhaps it's no surprise, given the presence of Peter Florence, disgraced former founder and director of the Hay Festival, as chair of the judges. Florence has form when it comes to ignoring the rubric – he also chaired the jury for the 2019 Booker fiasco, who split the prize between two winners, Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo, despite the rules insisting that the award "may not be divided".

■ A READER kindly alerts Bookworm to the puff from Andrew Marr on the jacket of Professor Christopher Prendergast's *Living and Dying with Marcel Proust*: "A work buzzing with appetite and curiosity… a real delight. No Proustian should be without it."

Just 31 pages into the book's introduction, the reader notes, the admiration is revealed to be mutual: Marr's seemingly banal assertion that *In Search of Lost Time* is "about a man reflecting on what it is to be alive" is presented by Prendergast as "the best description I have come across" of the great novel sequence's "living" dimension. The bromance between prof and pundit was also reflected in their joint bookshop event last week promoting the book and marking the recent centenary of Proust's death.

'Bookworm'

WORDS FAIL ME
Teresa Monachino

The Oxford comma is useful, helpful, and correct.

ARTS NEWS

■ THE opening of a new three-storey extension at Gainsborough's House in Sudbury, Suffolk, after a lavish £10m revamp, attracted much media attention with enthusiastic coverage in the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Observer* and on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row*.

Print coverage was sumptuously illustrated with some of the impressive new loans to the painter's birthplace. It is now the world's largest collection of work by Thomas Gainsborough *(bottom left)*, widely regarded as one of Britain's greatest artists – famous, among other things, for a series of self-portraits.

Unfortunately one media outlet was rather confused, illustrating its piece with an portrait of, er, the wrong Thomas Gainsborough. Painted by one John Theodore Heins, it depicted the artist's cousin *(bottom right)*.

The name of the publication that made this schoolboy error? The *Art Newspaper*, which boasts of "its reputation as the journal of record for the art world, and the bible of the art industry".

More Literary Review over ☞

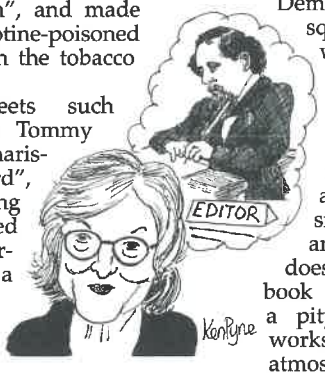
What the Dickens...

Demon Copperhead
Barbara Kingsolver
(Faber, £20)

DAMON ("Demon") Copperhead, named after his long dead, red-headed snake-handling father, is a little bitty boy living in a trailer with his juvenile mom at the southern end of the Appalachians in dear ole Virginee. Things aren't so good around here: mom is a strung-out, pill-popping alcoholic (although the neighbouring Peggot clan look out for them both); and they turn even less promising after the arrival of well-muscled step-dad Murrell Stoner, from whose vengeful hand the enraged Demon at one point draws blood.

Pretty soon it gets worse. His relapsing mother having been taken away, Demon is fostered out by social services to Mr Crickson, the sour old proprietor of "Creaky's Farm", and made to spend long, nicotine-poisoned hours helping with the tobacco harvest.

Here he meets such fellow-workers as Tommy Waddles and the charismatic "Fast Forward", real name Sterling Ford, distinguished by his "quarter-backing and a pick-up truck and hot girls". By this stage mom has OD'd for the last time, but there is consolation to be found in the friendship of his neighbour's grand-daughter, Emmy Peggot.



Remind you of anything? Well, it reminded your reviewer of a certain novel by the immortal C. Dickens. Damon is young David Copperfield; Stoner is Mr Murdstone; Mr Crickson is Mr Creakle of Salem House school; Waddles is Tommy Traddles; and Sterling Ford the seducing Steerforth. Not that there's any mystery in this expropriation as Kingsolver spends a two-and-a-half page preface revealing how in 2018 she spent a weekend at Bleak House in Broadstairs, one of Dickens's haunts and homes, and straightaway "in that study with its tall windows overlooking a stormy sea, I started writing my own *David Copperfield*."

"Come to this book however you like. I'm just glad you're here," Kingsolver breezily enjoins, adding that "It struck me that a good story stays true forever" and "sadly... some things haven't changed much in 170 years, where poverty and kids are concerned." There are also some bromides about the craft of fiction: journalists may give you the facts but "novelists, carefully and craftily sink you into them like a warm bath, where you will feel them. We're a subversive lot, opening secret valves, inviting lives to change."

Any sensible editor would have ordered Ms K to stop several paragraphs before this, or indeed to have junked the preface altogether, for its effect is to lead the reader by the nose into a novel where everything is pre-ordained and nothing left to tantalise.

Any paid-up Dickensian will know that the meth lab where Demon ends up working after school is supposed to be the blacking factory where David labours. Mrs Gummidge, Demon's grandmother Betsy and her wheelchair-bound brother Dick, football coach Winfield, his under-strapper U-Haul and daughter Angel – each of them struggles to make an impact on the story because their roles are already set in stone.

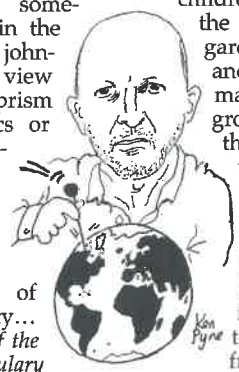
And so it's no spoiler alert to reveal that Fast Forward doesn't make it out of the waterfall; that Emmy and her cousin Hammer don't make it to the altar; and that Demon's first major squeeze Dori ("she was radical and fun, like a little girl"), who just happens to have a dog called Jip, is another casualty. On the plus side, Angel sticks around and Demon does end up with a book deal. All this is a pity as Kingsolver works up a hell of an atmosphere and has a hugely sinister contemporary twist to impart. *Demon Copperhead* was written as a response to the opioid crisis and sure enough what sends both mom and Dori on their final journey is a jumbo helping of OxyContin.

And yet, for all the energy of the prose – if Ms K isn't quite Annie Proulx when it comes to weird Americans talking weirder, she's pretty darn close – and the righteous anger of the message, in the end *Demon Copperhead* falls the tiniest bit flat. All to do with giving the game away in advance and swapping stealth for a series of flaring prompt cards. Kingsolver ends her preface by thanking the book trade for their support ("Wherever you find yourself in this chain of tales and sympathies – creator, seller, reader – you're helping to repair the human condition.") But she could have trusted to their intelligence rather than explaining everything away in advance.

WORDS FAIL ME
Teresa Monachino
cROWn

WHAT YOU DIDN'T MISS, Pt 94

The World: A Family History
Simon Sebag Montefiore
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £35)



GOSH. You know, I really think I'm on to something here. You see, in the past those academic johnnies have tended to view history through the prism of warfare, or politics or anthropological interaction, a salmagundi of socio-economic confluence, a borborgymi of migrant inter-mingling, a lacustrine seepage of vagrant humanity... [*other choice examples of the author's exotic vocabulary follow*]. But I've chosen to examine it by way of people. Even better, people who are related to each other.

Family matters, you understand, or rather family *matters*, as Mrs Thatcher, or it may have been Henry Kissinger, once said to me. Was it Foucault who once remarked: "People are very important in history. It's they that do things"? Whoever may have said it [*Gavin – can you check this on Wikipedia? Thanks HSS*] this has always seemed a crucial deduction. Or as the ninth century Kurdish poet Ibrahim-al-Shufti once put it: "The dragon soars into the sky; his scales sparkle in the sunlight; his hot breath scorches the desert; but it is the beetle who burrows into the heart of the mountain."

And so this is a story of the family in time. And not just Western European nobs, either. No indeed; here, as well as the usual suspects, you will find tales of Asian, African and Native American families, of women and children, slaves and servants, the outcast and the unregarded, the downtrodden and the marginal and many another minority group sadly neglected by the history books those wicked ushers forced me read at Eton.

It is a story of people living, loving, laughing and cutting each other's heads off from the Virgin Islands to Timbuktu and from the Yukon Trail to Vladivostok, a liminal, hybrid landscape in which resourcefulness, hope, compassion and monumental slaughter inextricably combine... Er... Nebuchadnezzar... The Akond of Swat... Lucrezia Borgia... Ivan the Terrible... Uncle Tom Cobley... Naturally, such dynasties continue to exert a terrific, though sometimes oblique, influence on the cultural life of our times. Only the other day, for example, it was revealed that the extensive publishing programme recently undertaken by myself and my fragrant wife is thought to have led to the destruction of several Scandinavian forests, the collapse of the Finnish timber industry and the complete economic realignment of large areas of north-west Europe... [*continues, for thousands of pages*]

Pseuds Corner

The Word predicted reality TV, Jackass-style stunts, TikTok pranks. It was a crucible of 21st century culture.

KATIE PUCKRIK,
The Guardian

[Jos Buttler's eyes] are the blue of an ocean from a destination holiday – the kind of blue you'd chuck on Instagram without a filter and still not be able to fully capture. The pure blue of hope and joy.

VITHUSHAN EHANTHARAJAH,
ESPN, *Cricinfo* website

Swimming can be a non-liturgical service, a naked exchange between you and the planet where words fall away and you drop back into the world as if you belong.

KATE REW, *The Guardian*

With its personal liturgies and worldwide communion, the World Cup can seem a kind of secular religion, or a benign global conspiracy for quadrennial fun. As Kafka might have put it had he been a football fan, there is plenty of hope, infinite hope, even, every four years, for England.

The Economist

The Book That No One Wanted to Read (Walker Books, £10.99, hardback) is a freewheeling conversation between a shy book and a keen reader... combines snarky silliness with a paean to the limitless possibilities of the blank page.

The Observer

Is Taylor Swift our greatest living poet?

Episode of Teach Me a Lesson with Greg James and Bella Mackie, BBC Sounds Classroom

I am the Henry Kissinger of clothing. The Mahatma Gandhi of wardrobing. I bring it to the people.

"Personal shopper" MIRIAM SHRAY, interviewed in Saks, New York, for *ES Magazine Fashion edition*

Contributors: Adam Kean, Jimmy Smallwood, Ellie Cotgrave, Qasim Siddiquie, Tim Cornell, Strobes, Nicholas Economakis

£10 paid for all entries

Punch gunk

Gloves Off
Tyson Fury
(Century, £25)

GLOVES OFF is subtitled "The Autobiography", but "*Another* Autobiography" would be more like it – this is boxer Tyson Fury's second memoir after *Behind the Mask*, which came out less than three years ago, and his third book overall. Not bad for a 34-year-old "bloke" whose only claims to fame are punching people in the face and having a go at the gays and the Jews.

Only joking! Those aren't the only things "the planet's most entertaining pugilist" is good at. You also have to salute his indefatigability at telling everyone how brilliant he is. The gloves are off here, all right: the first substantive paragraph alone contains no fewer than six boasts. What a joy to be in the company of one of the soi-disant geniuses of the age.

This of course makes Fury a thoroughly modern figure. He has Liz Truss-like levels of delusional self-belief. "It was hard not to think about the boxing world once I'd left it. *Who would fill that void?*"

He's the Elon Musk of sport – naturally talented but tragically ha mpered by having no sense of his own ridiculousness (the only funny line in the whole book, quite unintentional, is when Fury tells us how in his youth he was "taught to earn an honest day's wage by selling second-hand cars"), and as a result constantly supplying good reasons for people to hate him.

These reasons – the second and third things most people think of when they think of Fury – of course get short shrift in the book when they're mentioned at all. There's his failed drug test and subsequent ban, which according to Fury here was a mere bagatelle, just a technicality, a tiff between friends.

Or his comments about women: "a woman's best place is in the kitchen and on her back", or saying he'd kill his sister by hanging her if she was "promiscuous". Or gays, and how men marrying each other is, like paedophilia, evidence of "the devil com[ing] home". Or Jews, and how we're all happy to "be brainwashed by all the Zionist, Jewish people who own all the banks, all the papers, all the TV stations."

No, there's no mention of any of these things in the book at all – I mean, he's just a bit of a character, isn't he? – and this self-styled "deep thinker" doesn't recognise the teensiest bit of irony between his own sexism, antisemitism and homophobia, and his complaints in the book of anti-Gypsy racism and prejudice. (He does, in a footnote, mention his threat to kill one opponent, Derek Chisora. It was "a throwaway dig", apparently, so that's OK!)

In any other branch of showbiz, a figure as prejudiced and ugly as Fury would have been quietly disappeared long ago – in boxing, he remains a hero, not least to himself. And that's what we do get in the book: lots of hard-fought recognition of how much better he is than everyone else. If an opponent does land a punch on him, they're "lucky". When in 2018 he drew a bout for the first time, thus ending his unbroken run of wins, "by not losing, I'd emerged victorious." That's the spirit, Pollyanna!

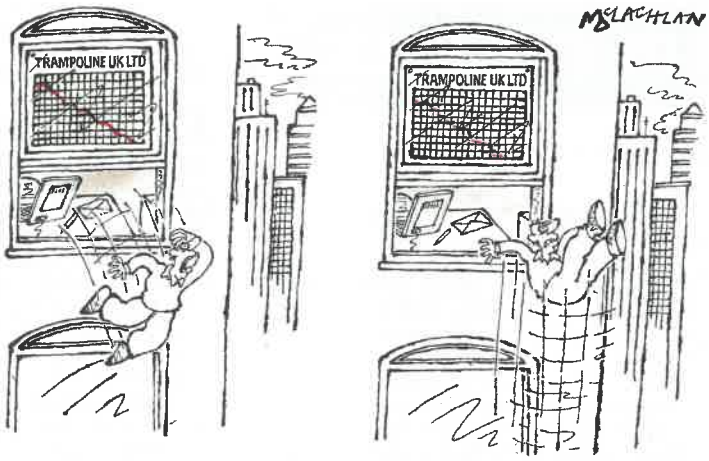
He doesn't need promoters – they need him! All three of his sons are called Prince – 'cos he's the King, geddit? Hell, he's even great at karaoke! ("Wonderful Tonight by Eric Clapton – I smashed it.") And the chapter on his recovery from depression is modestly titled The Second Coming.

Ah yes, the mental health stuff. It's heavily trailed, and the book is usefully supplied with four pages of helplines. But it isn't new – the suicide attempt where Fury almost drove his Ferrari into a wall, which forms the centrepiece of this section, came right at the start of *Behind the Mask*. It's all old news.

Aside from reheated mental health stuff, self-aggrandisement, and shocking truths like money doesn't bring happiness, all we get in this book is punishing blow-by-blow descriptions of all the bouts Fury has fought since the last book. Having made a fortune from pay-per-view, he's now turned to pay-per-page.

At the start and the end of the book, Fury assures us he has now retired and will never fight again, except for a purse of half a billion [sic] pounds. He didn't keep to it, of course. By the time you read this, he will be taking on Derek Chisora again, on 3 December. And he's planning another match after that, against Oleksandr Usyk.

The truth is, Fury will never stop. He cannot stop. He will retire more times than Frank Sinatra. This "family man" fills the book with pictures of his wife and kids, but will work all through the Christmas holidays because there's a "weird vibe" to days without routine. He will never be happy without boxing, and he will never fill that void. And that is the saddest thing of all in this book.



"This one's got no name on it"

"And where do you think you're going dressed like that?"

IN THE BACK

ONEWEB

Spaced out

NO SURPRISE for *Eye* readers at MPs' recent damning report on the £400m of public money laid out for a 50 percent stake in bankrupt satellite company OneWeb (*Eyes passim*).

The Commons science and technology committee, chaired by former business secretary Greg Clark (whose successor Alok Sharma signed off the deal in 2020) said any similar investment should be "avoided in the future". And this for a scheme that was meant to "put Britain at the forefront of a new commercial space age".

The UK's acquisition, in a consortium with Indian telecoms group Bharti, took place against the backdrop of its exit from the EU's Galileo global positioning satellite system. An initiative of former prime minister Boris Johnson and his aide Dominic Cummings, it always promised more than it was likely to deliver. The senior civil servant charged with completing the transaction, not satisfied it represented value for money, demanded a formal ministerial "direction" to go ahead.

OneWeb is now little more than an also-ran in a crowded low earth orbit satellite race (to the point, said the MPs, that "the ability to operate safely in space has been threatened"). Its dependence on launches from Russian bases using Soyuz rockets was never smart (as *Eye* 1527 pointed out in July 2020, well before this year's invasion of Ukraine) and duly prompted a shift this year to India.

Now the French firm Eutelsat is to buy OneWeb, with the government taking a minority share in Eutelsat in return. Even with the UK's supposedly "golden share", the sale – at the current share price a loss for taxpayers of more than £200m – hardly represents taking back control. What's more, Eutelsat was recently found by Paris-based *Reporters without Borders* to have been beaming Kremlin war propaganda channels to Russian subscribers. That 4 percent of its shares are controlled by China is hardly reassuring either.

OneWeb has spun its operations as a vital part of the UK space programme. Asked by SNP MP Carol Monaghan whether satellite manufacturing would come to the UK in return for taxpayers' investment, assurances were given by Chris McLaughlin, OneWeb's chief of government, regulatory affairs and engagement (and an old school Tory PR man who once called himself the "last unreconstructed Thatcherite"). A new generation of satellites "gen2" meant that "by 2024-25 we will be building in the UK".

Alas, within weeks OneWeb chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal was lukewarm on the prospect in a *Financial Times* interview: it would come down to "capabilities of manufacturing satellites here… [and] pricing". Given the limited launch possibilities in Britain compared to elsewhere, the outlook isn't hopeful.

"As a considerable amount of taxpayers' money was used to complete the purchase of OneWeb," concluded MPs, "the government should report to parliament on the state of the government's investment in OneWeb on a yearly basis". They also demanded the Eutelsat merger be "subject to proper scrutiny under the National Security and Investment Act". So much for life at the post-Brexit forefront of the space age.

ARMED FORCES

Rock sullied

EVERY part of the Ministry of Defence's estate in Gibraltar was handed over this month to a wing of the same pisspoor company already heavily involved in running the UK's dreadful migrant processing centres.

The new £155m "overseas prime contract", awarded by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), puts Mitie in charge of everything "from the harbour and the runway to offices and accommodation". Worrying times, then, for armed forces personnel posted to the British overseas territory, as Mitie is currently putting in a strong bid to seize the crown as Worst Outsourcing Company from veteran contenders like Crapita, Serco and G4S.

DIO optimistically hopes the contract with Mitie Central Government & Defence will "provide better value for money and quicker repairs" and will "improve the daily lived experience for all our people".

It is to be hoped the daily lived experience is better than that in those parts of the Manston migrant processing centre run by Mitie Care & Custody. A report from the prisons inspectorate earlier this year found that because of a lack of trained Mitie staff, exhausted arrivals had to sleep on floor mats in between chairs and were not allowed outside for fresh air.

While some of Mitie's workers were praised for their welcoming approach, the inspectors witnessed staff being "frustrated at the inappropriate environment and lack of privacy" for holding interviews in which women were disclosing that they had been trafficked. Mitie blames the problems on overcrowding, as it had no control over the number of arrivals.

Previous reports on Mitie-run facilities found the intake unit at Dover "not fit for purpose" and the immigration removal centre at Harmondsworth, near Heathrow, "rundown… bleak and dispiriting" (*Eyes passim*).

Mitie Defence won a whopping contract last year to take over maintenance at 91 military sites across Scotland and Northern Ireland, ranging from Edinburgh Castle to Remote Radar Head Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides. As the company's profits rocketed as a result of that deal, the Public and Commercial Services Union noted that Mitie's paltry 2.5 percent pay offer to maintenance staff left some of the poorest-paid staff in the civil service struggling to make ends meet.

DIO has more big contracts to dish out, with plans to award similar deals for looking after the infrastructure in Cyprus in early 2023 and the Falkland Islands and Ascension Island in 2024. Maybe they should at least take a look how things are going elsewhere before they press ahead with the usual suspects.

ACTORS' BENEVOLENT FUND

Slate of hand

THE strife-torn Actors' Benevolent Fund (ABF), which helps theatre folk suffering "hardship due to injury, illness or old age", will at last hold its 2022 annual general meeting (AGM) this December – with several new names joining the cast of this long-running drama.

Miriam Margolyes, Robert Bathurst, Patricia Hodge, Alex Macqueen and Abi Eniola are among those standing as independent candidates for the governing council. They will be up against an official 12-person slate recommended by the cabal who evicted most of the charity's trustees, including president Dame Penelope Keith, in a procedural *coup* nine months ago (*Eye* 1571).

The AGM should have been held in September. But that month the new rulers – the so-called Excluding Trustees, mostly lesser-known luvvies – called an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) instead, to approve new articles of association that would "modernise" the charity's governance. As *Eye* 1582 revealed, however, the crucial point was to ratify their grip on the fund, which has assets of well over £36m. The articles listed the Excluding Trustees by name and said they could "continue as council members until the annual general meeting to be held in [September] 2023". Keith and the other ousted council members – known as the Excluded Trustees – complained this was a sneaky way of "legitimising our exclusion and circumventing the election by the membership at this year's AGM".

Having failed to get the new articles ratified at the EGM (*Eye* 1583), the Excluding Trustees are trying another tack. At very short notice they have announced that an AGM, complete with council elections, will take place in London on 12 December. While promising a "transparent and fair" process, they have also created an ABF nominations committee that will not merely check candidates' entitlement to stand but then also choose a slate of officially recommended nominees, for which members (or their proxies) can vote with a single tick.

This is unusual practice for a charity: the only apparent precedent is this year's AGM of the National Trust, which saw off the Restore Trust pressure group by making it far easier for members to cast a "one-click" vote for a slate proposed by the NT's nominations committee than to vote for individual candidates. There is also a rather obvious conflict of interest, since the committee selecting which candidates the ABF should recommend is composed entirely of trustees who are themselves standing in the same election: actors Peter Harding, Rebecca Johnson and Nick Fletcher.

The draft articles failed to get through September's EGM precisely because they included a monolithic slate of proposed trustees. So why is the cabal persisting with this all-or-nothing approach to candidates? "We are not entertaining anyone who is not our friend," an Excluding Trustee explains. Expect much sound and fury when ABF members gather at Central Hall Westminster on 12 December – especially if Miriam Margolyes starts effing and blinding. Says one participant: "Miriam's well and truly up for this."

Miriam Margolyes

Robert Bathurst

Patricia Hodge

Alex Macqueen

Abi Eniola

AVIATION

Project runway

INCREASING numbers of commercial private jets are making use of RAF Northolt as the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is once again pushing its luck on civilian use of the small west London airport.

Known principally as a government airport, used for diplomatic traffic and travel by the royal family, RAF Northolt's weekday commercial operating hours were increased last year, and weekend flying was given the go-ahead earlier this year.

Universal Aviation, which operates ground services such as fuelling and baggage-loading for private users of the airport, advertises Northolt as the "closest airport to central London… less congested than other nearby airport options… because Northolt is a Royal Air Force (RAF) airfield, it offers a high-degree of security and privacy." So, it's just perfect for business bigwigs and international jet-setters happy to pay a juicy premium to take off or land there and avoid crowds and problems at Heathrow.

It's rather less perfect for locals, as with the increase in available time slots the number of commercial take-offs and landings roughly quadrupled this year to 824 in June and 825 in July. If this level of activity continues, RAF Northolt will be closer than ever to the cap of 12,000 civil movements a year set by ministers following a 2013 review, which decided to retain RAF Northolt as a military aerodrome rather than selling it off. Movements were previously capped at 7,000 a year.

In 2017, the MP for the area around the airport – one Boris Johnson (known back then as a ferocious campaigner against airport expansion at nearby Heathrow) – wrote to the MoD asking whether runway improvements at Northolt meant there were plans to increase flight numbers. Back came the reply from then defence secretary Gavin Williamson: "I can assure your constituents that the Ministry of Defence has no current plans to turn RAF Northolt into a commercial airport. Rather, the work is required for military operational reasons. I can further assure them that, following the runway infrastructure works, there are no plans to increase the number of civilian commercial flights."

The increasing business use of RAF Northolt is also frustrating to regional rivals such as Biggin Hill Airport and London Oxford Airport, which have to comply with the stringent conditions to qualify for a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) aerodrome licence, while RAF Northolt does not. In 2014 a judicial review concluded there was "no power to force the application of civil aerodrome design infrastructure standards" on government aerodromes which accept civil aviation activity. However, a memorandum of understanding was later signed "to enable the CAA to maintain an appropriate level of safety regulatory oversight".

ALFIE BEST

Smoke alarm

TWELVE weeks on, blazes continue to flare from the 30m-high industrial waste heap on land in Yorkshire owned by zillionaire Alfie Best (see last *Eye*). Long-suffering residents, forced to inhale noxious smoke, still fear the impact it is having on their lives, livelihood and health.

They say too little is being done to speedily remove the 100,000 smouldering tonnes of waste on Rotherham's Kiveton Industrial Park, nor to force Best or those operating the site to do so. Air monitoring has been inadequate and they have not had access to data. Much to their concern, the Environment Agency (EA) and borough council pulled out of a recent public meeting, instead organising their own "drop-in" two days earlier.

Some are also feeling intimidated by the activities of those associated with the site. Local MP Alexander Stafford, who has raised the issue with ministers, told the *Eye* he and residents meeting near the site were sworn at as men in white vans drove by, blaring horns. Nurse and widely quoted critic Cheryl Barton has been the victim of online trolling, including a Facebook post from site manager Lee Shaw suggesting on bonfire night that she was to be the Kiveton Park fire "guy falks" (sic).

The latest serious blaze, last Monday night, took firefighters from three appliances 90 minutes to get under control, with residents again warned to stay indoors. The *Eye* tried in vain to contact Mr Best, who was seen helicoptering in last week. But Lee Shaw said his Facebook post was "just a joke" and the *Eye* had it "all wrong".

A letter he delivered to residents suggested the problems were historic, caused by the previous operator, and that they had EA permissions to move the dump and bring in "inert" material to create a bund. But as with previous matters involving Best (*Eyes passim*), there is only a grain of truth. The waste was originally licensed in 2014 to another waste operator, but had long been revoked for breaches of conditions. That operator went bust and Kiveton became an "abandoned waste site" – something Best would have known when he acquired it.

The EA insists no one there holds an environmental permit and no permission for alternative storage was given. Some waste exemptions for "low risk" activities on the estate have been given. But as investigations into possible offences continue, it "cannot comment further".

It says air particulate concentrations have been low, but residents experiencing breathing issues and headaches say they have not had access to the data. They know the task is difficult, presenting a hazard to firefighters and others working to make the site safe. They are concerned, however, that there is no end in sight and that only the MP is listening.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

56% Increase in recorded fraud offences in last five years (to 987,000 last year) according to National Audit Office

25% Decrease in charges and summonses for fraud offences in last five years (to 4,816 last year)

0.5% Proportion of fraud offences leading to police action

CARE HOMES

Achieving closure

WHEN Mark Atkinson, CEO of the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), flogged off its 23 specialist care homes last year he said he would only sell to providers "committed to the long term" (*Eye* 1514). So how did that go?

Achieve Together, which took them over, has just announced it is to close the Leopold Muller Home for up to 22 deaf, deaf/blind and autistic adults in Bath. The move follows the home's first inspection under new ownership by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), triggered by concerns about "leadership, people's cultural needs being met and staffing".

After key workers left following the changeover, the home was short-staffed and relied on agency workers, few of them trained in British Sign Language (BSL), making communication problematic. The damning report which downgraded the home from "good" to "inadequate" found a litany of failures with residents at risk of fire, choking and pressure ulcers.

Inspectors visited on three days in the summer and saw some residents left isolated, doing nothing and eventually falling asleep. Inspectors found there was no care centred on deaf culture, no access to community clubs and not even sign language TV. There was no fire alarm system for deaf people. Although some staff were caring, residents were not always treated with dignity and respect. Some carers would shout down the corridor about people's intimate care and not shut doors to give residents privacy.

Of the six former RNID homes it has inspected so far, the CQC has issued reports on four (including Leopold Muller). All were downgraded from "good". The other three, now rated as "requiring improvement", are the Barron Winnicott Home and Ashley Phoenix Home, also in Bath, and Pendean Court in Liskeard, Cornwall.

Achieve Together declined to say if it was planning other closures. In a statement it said it had worked immediately to rectify some of the priority issues raised by CQC. It said it was committed to ensuring people received "the best possible care" and the report on Leopold Muller had informed its decision to close "in the best interests of those it supported". It was for residents, their families and the local authority to find provision to "better suit their needs".

When Atkinson became RNID's CEO, there were fears he had been hired precisely to get the charity out of care provision, as he did when in charge of another disability charity, Scope. As *Eye* readers know, large sections of the care home industry have fallen into the hands of equity investors and bankers who use complex leasing, offshoring and financial engineering to ensure profits. The Scope homes were bought out by Salutem Healthcare; described as a specialist health and social care provider it was little more than an investment vehicle.

So what about Achieve Together, which has now acquired and runs some 400 care homes across the country? It is wholly owned by Galaxy Group Bidco Ltd, whose ultimate parent company is AMP Capital in Luxembourg. Sound familiar?

POST OFFICE SCANDAL

Bugs and fatal flaws

THE judicial inquiry into the Post Office Horizon IT scandal, in which hundreds of sub-postmasters were convicted on faulty computer evidence and thousands more lost their livelihoods, has heard some of the grim history that formed the backdrop to the most widespread miscarriage of justice in British legal history.

Questioned by counsel to the inquiry Jason Beer KC, Post Office lifer John Roberts (chief executive in the late 1990s until retiring in 2002) told the inquiry how the organisation had been considered something of a basket case in the days of Thatcherism. The Monopolies & Mergers Commission had looked at it in the 1980s and concluded it should be "managed for decline". This was rejected but it was clear the network "needed to be automated".

The Post Office's main source of business, around 25 percent of its turnover, was social security, prompting a programme that would both automate benefits payments and computerise the out-of-date Post Office, enabling it to move into other financial services.

The task was handed, via a private finance initiative contract, to computer company ICL. It had been set up in the 1960s as part of the Wilson government's plans, the company's late-1990s chief executive Keith Todd told the inquiry, to create a "competitor to the global technology players". Acquired by Fujitsu of Japan in 1990, it went on to win a large chunk of the public IT market that ballooned under New Labour. Just before then, in 1996 ICL won a deal from the Department of Social Security (DSS) and the Post Office to develop what became the Horizon IT system (even though, the inquiry learned, the DSS was at the time suing the company over non-performance on an unrelated contract).

Birthing pains

HORIZON was mired in trouble and mutual recriminations from the outset. As early as 1997 the DSS and Post Office served a "breach of contract" notice on ICL; each party began blaming the other for delays.

Fujitsu, though, had more pressing concerns. It was looking to float ICL on the stock market and was hastening its major government contract in pursuit of that. Todd wrote of the need to "roll out the infrastructure as quickly as possible… Failure to do so will significantly damage ICL and its flotation…" Asked about this more than two decades on, however, he insisted that "at no time did flotation have any direct impact on this project". (The flotation would ultimately be scuppered by the early 2000s technology slump.)

When Todd and Fujitsu president Naoyuki Akikusa were summoned to a meeting with the DTI (now the government's business department), a briefing note remarked: "Keith Todd should be left with no doubts about the seriousness DTI attaches to ICL delivering on [Horizon and another government deal]". Todd agreed with Angela Patrick, counsel for many of the victims, that "In 1999 and 2000, if it became known that there were serious problems with Horizon, or if it was failing, that would have damaged your continuing relationship with government…"

It became clear from later witnesses that, against this background of financial and corporate pressure, software engineering quality was not the highest priority. Early releases had higher than expected numbers of bugs.

Most damning evidence of all came from David McDonnell, an ICL deputy development manager on Horizon. When he arrived in the spring of 1998, he told the inquiry, he found "a lack of standards, lack of rules, lack of discipline, lack of structure within the development team". The set-up was "crazy, never seen anything like it".

When McDonnell and a colleague produced a report on the misfiring programme as part of a special taskforce that October, they commented: "Whoever wrote this code clearly has no understanding of elementary mathematics or the most basic rules of programming." The programming team's output was, McDonnell told the inquiry, "a standing joke".

Cash test dummies

McDONNELL also recounted how, with the pressure on to "go live", senior Fujitsu executives were in no mood to hear about problems. The taskforce report had pointed out that, while some parts of the programme could be saved, "the cash account module was beyond repair and must be rewritten". But when McDonnell went to ICL's "chief architect" on the project, Gareth Jenkins, he had no joy. McDonnell described how he had "tried to get [Jenkins] to lend his political design weight [ie influence] behind the argument that at least the cash account should be rewritten" but that at that point Jenkins "became kind of evasive… I was never able to get him back down on site again after that".

Rather than rewrite the relevant software, ICL opted for more code to monitor errors. "It's like the captain of a ship has been told there's a hole in the boat," explained McDonnell. "Instead of fixing the hole, what they did was they went away and constructed this [new software] release, which is akin to painting a plimsoll line on the outside of the boat so that they could measure how fast it was sinking."

With fatal flaws unaddressed, late in 1999 Horizon began going live in Post Office branches across the UK. Gareth Jenkins would testify to its reliability in subsequent criminal trials.

The inquiry continues.

HIGH PRINCIPALS

Wolves' howl

AS UNIVERSITY staff started a series of strike days and refused to do extra work outside their contracts in late November, Wolverhampton University sent lecturers a menacing email pressuring them to do unpaid work and threatening repercussions if they removed online teaching materials.

The university's acting director of human resources, Aisla Nicholls, told staff they would be docked pay for strike days (which is normal), that this would be taken at 1/260th of their salary per strike day (which is not normal for strikers employed full-time, and excess deduction is illegal) and that if they refuse to make up any teaching sessions the university reschedules, their pay would be docked a second time (which is bizarre). "It is considered a reasonable management instruction to reconvene any learning activities cancelled due to strike action, and the University will expect staff to cooperate in this vein. Failure to do so will be considered a breach of contract and will likely result in a pay deduction for partial performance," said the email.

"Striking is the withdrawal of labour," noted union officials, firing back their own advice to strikers. "Rescheduling missed work is NOT going on strike. If you reschedule missed work you are simply working for free after taking a day's unpaid holiday."

In addition to the national strike days, the industrial action coordinated by academics' union UCU over pay, working conditions and pensions will see lecturers taking "action short of a strike" (ASOS). National guidance on ASOS says staff should stick to "working their contracted hours and duties and not volunteering to do more" and should remove uploaded materials related to any cancelled classes. This might include anything from handouts to videos uploaded for previous years' students during lockdowns.

"The University would consider the removal of any materials from our virtual learning environments a breach of contract," warned the HR department. While the dispute has become increasingly bitter at many universities, relations at Wolverhampton are especially strained following massive staff cuts and a missing (below inflation) pay rise, which should have happened in August but is understood to have been deferred because of the university's struggling finances (*Eye* 1574).

RESTRAINT DEATH

Holding pattern

FOR the second time in as many weeks an inquest is looking into whether the use of prolonged police restraint, at times in a face-down prone position, played a role in the death of a previously healthy man.

The death of Neal Saunders *(pictured)*, after being restrained on the ground by six Thames Valley officers for 75 minutes, is the latest tragic case to question police tactics and training.

Mr Saunders, 39, died in hospital from a cardiac arrest on 4 September 2020 – the day after he had been detained. The jury at Reading coroner's court was told police had been called to his father's flat in Langley because Neal was exhibiting symptoms of paranoia and acute behavioural disturbance and was "smashing up the place" – probably because of drug use.

Mr Saunders was handcuffed behind his back, two straps were placed around his legs and an officer sat on him using a baton to press down on the top of his legs, the inquest was told.

PC Ashley Jones, one of the officers, told jurors he did not hear Mr Saunders protest that that he could not breathe, even though it was caught on bodycam footage. Jones said prolonged restraint, which police are told to avoid, was the safest option because at times Mr Saunders displayed "unexplainable strength".

But jurors were told there were times when he was not shouting or resisting and that his breathing was sometimes rapid and at other times "laboured". Coroner Heidi Connor suggested police did have options to move Mr Saunders from his prone position – at least for some of the time. Even after officers recognised he needed medical assistance, he was held in the prone position and carried face down to the ambulance.

The case is very similar to that reported in the last *Eye*, of Krystian Kilkowski, 32. At his inquest a jury at Norwich coroner's court concluded face-down restraint for over an hour was a factor in his "drug related" death. A paramedic had told the court Mr Kilkowski was barely conscious, turning blue and in need of urgent critical care, when he arrived at the scene. He was so shocked by what he saw he said he immediately thought of George Floyd, the black man killed by police in the US during similar face-down restraint.

The inquest into Mr Saunders's death is likely to conclude later this week.

FREE SCHOOLS

Profit role

A FOR-PROFIT US-owned company, which took on the running of a Suffolk free school under a 10-year, £21m management deal, has quit the UK market altogether after making big losses.

Sweden-based Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) was bought by US investors soon after it signed the unusual deal with the Sabres Trust, which had campaigned for the opening of a new free school but then hired the company to run it (*Eye 1355*). IES Breckland opened in 2012, at a time when there were reported to be coalition tensions between then education secretary Michael Gove and deputy prime minister Nick Clegg over the involvement of for-profit providers in the expanding free school sector.

With school budgets in the UK extremely squeezed, IES was ultimately unable to find any margin to turn a profit. Indeed, it has twice been bailed out by its parent company, reported a deficit of £435,000 by 2020 and paid an early contract termination fee of £130,000.

IES told *Schools Week* this month that the UK was "no longer seen as a strategic market for IES". It took the losses on the nose and said it was pleased to have handed the school to Unity Schools Partnership earlier this year with a "good" Ofsted rating and "a strong financial footing".

The departure of IES marks the apparent end of an experiment with foreign for-profit firms involved in running free schools. The Erudition Schools Trust (set up by K12 Inc) and the Learning Schools Trust (sponsored by Kunskapsskolan) both quit their involvement in 2016-17, while the Collaborative Academies Trust (backed by Edison Learning) transferred its last remaining school to another trust in 2020.

MINING NEWS

Golden shower

A CANADIAN-OWNED company hoping to make a fortune from developing Northern Ireland's only gold mine has been fined £120,000 for "cutting corners" and endangering the lives of miners.

Two had spoken of close escapes after rock-blasting operations in 2018 at Cavanacaw in Omagh, County Tyrone, triggered a series of mine collapses, the development of a sink hole and floods gushing through a shaft.

Flintridge Resources admitted three serious breaches of health and safety legislation – failing to protect its employees, to keep secure the mine's working areas, and to prevent a dangerous inrush of water. Flintridge is owned by Galantas Gold Corporation of Toronto, which has been opening up new underground channels in what was once an open cast mine.

Despite the Galantas website boasting that "health, safety and environment impact are continually controlled to comply with strict regulations", the judge at Dungannon crown court said, the company had failed to "bring in measures which are standard in the industry". He said "corners were cut" and "culpability high".

A subsequent inspection of the mine found that the so-called "crown pillar" – a retaining rock mass supposed to support the land surface and underground mine and protect workers from inflows of water, soil and rock – was less than two-thirds of the 15m height it should have been. Cable bolts necessary to secure the roof had not been put in place properly. Thus when five explosive blasts were detonated almost simultaneously on 9 July, the events which followed over the next few days had the potential to "cause significant injury or even death".

The retaining pillar collapsed, with one worker saying he witnessed a fall of around 150 tonnes of rock, which missed him by two metres. The area was closed off, but on the night of 10-11 July a sinkhole developed under a roadway within the site, partially sucking in an excavation vehicle. The driver luckily escaped through a broken cabin window. Two men working underground at the time evacuated when they realised water was coming into the mine. It was estimated that around 860,000 litres of water entered the mine within a 60-minute period.

None of which has stopped Northern Ireland's Department of the Economy – when it was functioning – awarding two more exploration licences, bringing the total to five on the 596sq km site.

IR35 WORKING

Brolly wobbles

CHANCELLOR Jeremy Hunt's announcement that he would reverse relaxations to so-called IR35 tax laws is good news for the "umbrella" companies industry.

Such companies take care of the messy business of dealing with HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) for individual contractors to government and large companies. They employ sometimes thousands of contractors, who would otherwise have to deal with a client either directly or via their own service company, but would then have to be put on the client's PAYE payroll. An umbrella company, supposedly run by professionals in the field, takes the contractor on to its books and takes care of the tax issues.

Mounting evidence suggests, however, that those running these companies are often better at taking care of themselves. In one recent scandal, revealed by the website *Contractor Voice*, umbrella company provider Orange Genie deprived thousands of workers in sectors from IT to healthcare of around £4m through "salary skimming": deducting small, unspecified amounts from every pay packet in generic "employment costs".

Orange Genie, responsible for nearly £250m in contractors' wages annually, has faced sanctions from the sector's self-regulatory body, the Freelancer and Contractor Service Authority (FCSA). But a ban was overturned by the FCSA's supposedly independent appeal panel and replaced with a six-month suspension and a fine, though no suggestion that Orange Genie should repay the skimmed money.

The panel might not be quite as independent as claimed, however: one of its four members is Neil Carberry, boss of the Recruitment and Employment Federation, which describes itself as "the voice of the recruitment industry" and has promoted Orange Genie.

Reports of abuse among umbrella companies, for example by holding on to holiday pay, have been rife. A year ago HMRC issued a "call for evidence" on the matter, which potentially affects an estimated 400,000 people working through umbrella companies, but is dragging its feet.

Meanwhile, an all-party parliamentary group on taxpayer fairness, co-chaired by the DUP's Sammy Wilson, Tory Greg Smith and Lib Dem Baroness Kramer, has been seeking answers from the FCSA about the sector's poor record and the FCSA's hardly better record on policing it. Thus far the MPs are getting little co-operation even as more skeletons look set to tumble out of the umbrella cupboard.

FOOD POVERTY

Shadowy boxing

POVERTY campaigners are outraged that a multinational food wholesaler – famed for providing "rip-off" food boxes to those shielding during the pandemic – has again been hired to supply food to those most in need.

Bidfood, one of the country's largest food wholesalers, was handed a joint £208m government contract to provide a food lifeline for around 1.5m clinically vulnerable people told to stay home during the pandemic. It transpired, however, that for every £44 the government paid per box, there was a whacking 69 percent mark-up on the £26 retail price. Worse, poverty campaigners complained that the boxes provided "poor nutrition at exorbitant prices" for those with cancers and other serious conditions.

Now it seems that at least two local authorities, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, are using government hardship funds to contract with Bidfood to supply food to community pantries. Unlike free foodbanks, pantries supported by grants and charitable donations offer groceries at a fraction of retail prices in return for £5 membership. The 23 pantries in both counties have spent previous awards from the government's £421m Housing and Support scheme, administered by local authorities, as they think appropriate to meet their members' needs.

But their latest allocations must apparently be spent with the profit-seeking Bidfood, a subsidiary of Bidcore Group, listed in South Africa. It recorded record profits last year of 7.6bn rand (£370m) – boosted no doubt by numerous government and local authority contracts for provision to hospitals, schools and the army.

Pantry volunteers are dismayed and angry because as the Covid-19 food boxes illustrated, they could buy double the amount of food if left to "forage" locally for the best daily deals. For example, Bidfood beef mince costs in excess of £10 a kilo, compared to prices ranging from £4.50 to £8 in supermarkets.

Joyce Milford, a trustee of the Ventnor pantry on the Isle of Wight, which was handed £10,000 to spend with Bidfood, estimated that the pantry could locally source up to three times more food for its 200 members if left to its own devices. The Food Aid Network said government funding should go as cash payments to people directly to reduce "the need for charitable food aid".

Asked by the *Eye* whether their Bidfood deals (£84,000 in Hampshire; £60,000 on the Isle of Wight) were an appropriate use of taxpayers' money, both authorities said in a joint statement they were designed to top up direct grants so far of £559,500 (Hampshire) and £96,550 (Isle of Wight). Bidfood gave pantries and other projects "access to non-perishable food in bulk, at no extra cost", it said. Which neatly ignores the fact that the money could go far further for those in need of food – if Bidfood wasn't taking a cut!

In the City

The great pension hole

HEARINGS before a trio of parliamentary committees in the past two weeks have exposed how complacent City regulators were blindsided by the liability-driven investment (LDI) pension fund crisis triggered by the Kwarteng/Truss mini-budget, and how it could happen again.

Evidence from regulators, LDI providers and pension experts to MPs and peers painted a depressing picture of regulatory silos, inaction and buck-passing, as if the 2008 global financial crisis had never happened, its lessons forgotten.

The "real loss" to defined benefit (DB) final salary pension funds was estimated by Professor Iain Clacher of Leeds University Business School at £500bn. Had the Bank of England not stepped in to buy government bonds at a cost of £19bn to the taxpayer, the banks that lent money to pension funds for LDI transactions or were the funds' counterparties would have lost "tens of billions", according to Nikhil Rathi, chief executive of the Fundamentally Complicit Authority.

The final bill to the 5,000-plus DB pension funds has still to be assessed. The biggest hits could be among the many small schemes that invested in pooled LDI funds; pensions blogger Henry Tapper told MPs there had been "carnage" there.

Yet remarkably, the Pensions Regulator chief executive Charles Counsell told peers the regulatory system had delivered "quite good results". Who knew? Nobody, it seems. Risk modelling used by regulators and regulated proved both inaccurate and woefully inadequate, just as in 2008 regarding US house prices. Modelling was "reasonably plausible", bleated Counsell.

"No one anticipated that the British government would choose to create such extraordinary instability in their own sovereign debt market."
Sir John Kingman

What happened was "beyond any historical precedent", wailed Rathi, justifying how the FCA lived down to its *Private Eye* moniker. "What is extreme but plausible has changed."

It happened far quicker than imagined possible. Pension funds had to find extra collateral for their excessively leveraged bad LDI bets on government bonds in hours, not days or weeks, when gilt prices cratered. Government bond markets became suddenly illiquid, resulting in sharply lower prices.

"We had never stress-tested for that," declared Legal & General CEO Sir Nigel Wilson. The insurer is a major provider of LDI funds. "There has never been a question that the stress-testing we have had in the past has been inappropriate." The FCA and the Bank of England's Prudential Regulation Authority [PRA] had never "suggested that we should run different scenarios or increase the stress-testing".

But who was in charge? "There is a very good question about who exactly is the principal regulator in this whole industry," Wilson told peers. "We have multiple regulators. We can easily get to four or five in some of these areas. It all goes back to the Bank of England, but there needs to be clarity about who the principal regulator would be for this particular part of the pensions industry." The Bank has previously pointed its finger at the Pensions Regulator and the FCA.

L&G chairman Sir John Kingman, late of the Treasury, knew who was to blame: "No one anticipated that the British government would choose to create such extraordinary instability in their own sovereign debt market."

Former Bank of England deputy governor Sir Paul Tucker was having none of it. He accused all those involved of complacency and neglect. Pension funds were stress-tested to survive a 100-basis point rise in gilt yields. Tucker described this as "wholly inadequate". It should have been 300.

"People have been overly relaxed about leverage outside the banking system," Tucker told peers. He also took aim at the Bank's financial policy committee (FPC), created after the 2008 crisis, for its inaction. "I am very sad that the expectation from parliament, the public and the media on FPC has not developed in the way that I and others expected."

Pensions consultant John Ralfe pointed to the "very, very powerful" pensions lobby. LDI had been a major and growing money spinner for the past 20 years. It solved one problem – pension fund long-term liabilities – but created another. Instead of using LDI to hedge their risks, said Ralfe, funds had borrowed excessively, seeking greater returns. Leveraged LDI was "pure speculation" and "a bad thing", said Ralfe, especially when hidden from view.

Rathi admitted the FCA had not focused on the systemic risk from LDI: "This particular risk, this vulnerability, did not receive the attention that other systemic risks did." The FCA did not know what was going on with LDI and "the small number of concentrated managers and counterparties that were playing a role here".

One reason was because it did not have the data on LDI and leverage to assess that risk. And nor did the Pensions Regulator. "We have not historically collected that data systematically," Counsell admitted. As a result: "We did not have as much data on this as perhaps we would have liked." After all, LDI funds were "designed for calm times" according to the FCA. Counsell sought to reassure peers: "We are certainly considering whether we need to do so going forward. That said, we have pretty good intelligence about what is going on." Really?

Prof Clacher told MPs the regulator did not have "the full picture" of the funds it supposedly regulated. There was "very, very little good information" on LDI exposure and leverage.

The picture presented was of the FCA and PRA assuming the Pensions Regulator was on the case when manifestly it was not. LDI was always somebody else's problem.

The Bank of England highlighted LDI as a potential risk area in a 2018 report. The Pensions Regulator had carried out a survey which found nothing to see. Dr Con Keating, head of research at pensions insurer Brighton Rock, told MPs the survey was "not fit for purpose". It only covered large pension funds. The LDI crisis had been predictable.

The right questions were not asked of pension fund trustees or their advisers, only some of whom were FCA-regulated. Most LDI funds were based offshore, in Ireland or Luxembourg, so data was not immediately available. The Pensions Regulator did not want to increase the administrative burden on trustees.

L&G CEO Wilson cautioned that "given what has happened and the volatility and variability around the world right now, we should be looking for more black swan events".

If so, the City's chief regulator was hardly reassuring. Rathi said the FCA needed to "understand better where these big concentrations of leverage and concentrated counterparty exposures are building up" – risks out there in the often offshore darkness of shadow banking. "It is often the synthetic or more opaque leverage that comes to light only after the event. It is positions that are held not just in one jurisdiction… and the mixed reporting requirements that exist in other jurisdictions."

"The biggest risk is people thinking you're an idiot"

Tucker warned peers: "It is easy to conduct these discussions, and more importantly for policymakers to do so, as though everything in the banking sector must be hunky-dory and none of the carelessness in the run-up to the 2007 crisis could possibly be recurring. We have evidence in at least one case [Credit Suisse?] that that is simply not true."

All of which suggests history will be repeated. The only questions are how, where and when.

Cost of crypto

ONE thing the FCA did get right was to prevent collapsed cryptocurrency exchange FTX operating here. But that red flag did not prevent 80,000 UK residents from becoming victims of last month's crash when FTX, once valued at $32bn, evaporated within days, leaving evidence of a massive fraud.

IN THE BAHAMAS: Blair, Clinton and Bankman-Fried

There were other red flags flying over founder Sam Bankman-Fried: unregulated offshore operation; no financial transparency. None of which put off Tony Blair and Bill Clinton from sitting alongside "SBF" discussing "The World Today" at an FTX-funded Crypto Bahamas event back in April.

The 30-year-old was riding high, powered by political and charitable donations. Doubtless this was a well-paid gig, and perhaps FTX was expected to contribute to the other Blair and Clinton good causes. Should not any payments be returned for the benefit of FTX creditors?

Bankman-Fried became a loud supporter of "effective altruism" after meeting one of its originators, Oxford philosophy professor William MacAskill. FTX money – almost $32m – was promised earlier this year to the Centre for Effective Altruism, and Longview Philanthropy, part of the registered charity Effective Ventures Foundation. The trustees include co-founder MacAskill. Fellow trustee Nick Beckstead became CEO of the FTX Foundation, which claimed to have given away $160m. MacAskill and Beckstead have resigned from its Future Fund. Questions are likely to be asked about what due diligence was done on FTX.

For all his new-age talk of effective altruism, "SBF" clearly believed in the old saying that charity begins at home. FTX loaned him $1bn, used billions of customers' money to fill holes in sister trading company Alameda Research, and spent $250m buying Bahamas beachfront properties for him and his inner circle.

John Ray, running FTX since it collapsed

into bankruptcy, has described "a complete failure of corporate controls" and "unacceptable management practices". One of the FTX auditors set up a branch in the virtual metaverse – where presumably numbers are whatever you want them to be.

HBOS let-off

THE six-year, £7m investigation into HBOS directors and senior managers looks increasingly like a charade. Started in 2016 as an unavoidable response to criticism of past regulatory failure, it continued despite no action increasingly, if ever, being likely or even possible against anyone.

That much emerges from the FCA and PRA's far from convincing explanation to the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking, published last week, of the no further action decision announced in August.

The joint response did not give detailed reasons but provided three broad hints. A ban from financial services was the only option as disciplinary proceedings were out of time – known in 2016 – but a "not fit and proper" ban needed to be justified by future public risk, not historical actions. (Just when that became the criteria is unclear, as the all-party group responded that it is not in the legislation.)

Those mostly responsible were already long gone from financial services in 2016 and unlikely to be allowed back. Any ban had to be based on standards before 2008, not those after the financial crisis – also known in 2016. There were gaps in contemporaneous documentation, partly due to the regulatory delays before 2016 – presumably discovered well before August 2022.

So why did it take so long and cost so much to do so little? Was there some lengthy legal debate about the "future risk" requirement? The investigation was in many ways a PR sop to public outrage that HBOS chairman Lord Stevenson and chief executive Andy Hornby had walked away from the wreckage, and that Hornby in particular was earning millions in well-paid senior posts outside banking. How to admit there was no chance of punishment for costing the taxpayer £21bn? Delay until all too late.

PLANET FOOTBALL

Manchester United

A VERY old joke. How do you make a small fortune? Have a large one, buy a newspaper. Today's version would be: buy a football club. Owners require a constantly open cheque book if they want success. Losses are more common than profits due to ever-rising player costs. Dividends can be rare. The only way of cashing in is to cash out by selling.

Suddenly Liverpool and Manchester United are potentially for sale by their American owners. With no super league, TV rights possibly peaking, Chelsea fetching £2.5bn and private equity buyers with billions to invest, valuations are at their highest, so the time could be right.

Manchester United has been the gift that kept on giving for the Glazer family since they bought the club in 2005, largely with borrowed money. They have enjoyed a substantial dividend stream since 2015, plus cash payments from share sales since the club was listed in 2012.

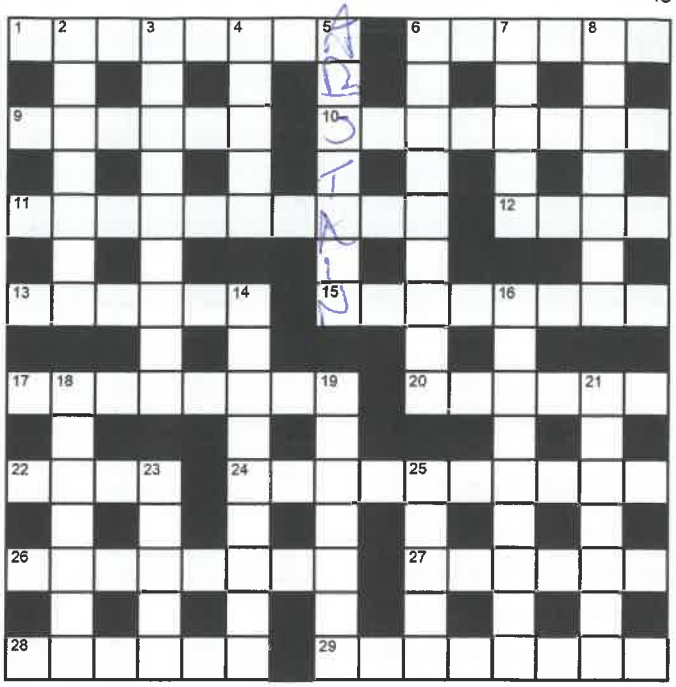
The New York listing generated $116m from the sale of shares into the public offering. Since then, three of the six Glazer siblings and their trusts have sold shares in 2014 and last year worth a total of $303m.

Before news of the possible sale, the shares were below the 2012 $14 issue price at $13. They jumped to $21, valuing the club at $3.5bn (£2.9bn) on talk of a bid of up to £7bn. The Glazers' controlling stake cost £270m in 2005. A tempting swap for fan hatred.

'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 742

by Cyclops



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Please send entries by email only to crossword@private-eye.co.uk

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ACROSS

1 Dick garnish? Cyclops had one (8)
6 President almost gets disheartened Trumpists personal clean-up aids (6)
9 Minister has two Conservative leaders trapping Right in pathetic lie (6)
10 Norm's defiant position on publicity about Republican (8)
11 Satisfy yourself the state's utter crap, stifling British-American overtures (10)
12 See 22ac.
13 Mark – bastard's turned over the old lady (6)
15 Pardon me – about to do a Jeffrey Archer? (4-4)
17 Eric came over dessert (3,5)
20 In earnest? Let's cosy up (6)
22/12ac. Sort of sex with old lover in the morning is a test (4,4)
24 Stupid sort of deputy initially subordinate to principal (10)
26 Calculating type of county politician – true dud (8)
27 Supporter: "It's good when ex-president loses his head" (6)
28 Learn to relax after useless leader's summing up of the recent state of British politics? (6)
29 Charity takes Es before start of sex in grand surroundings (8)

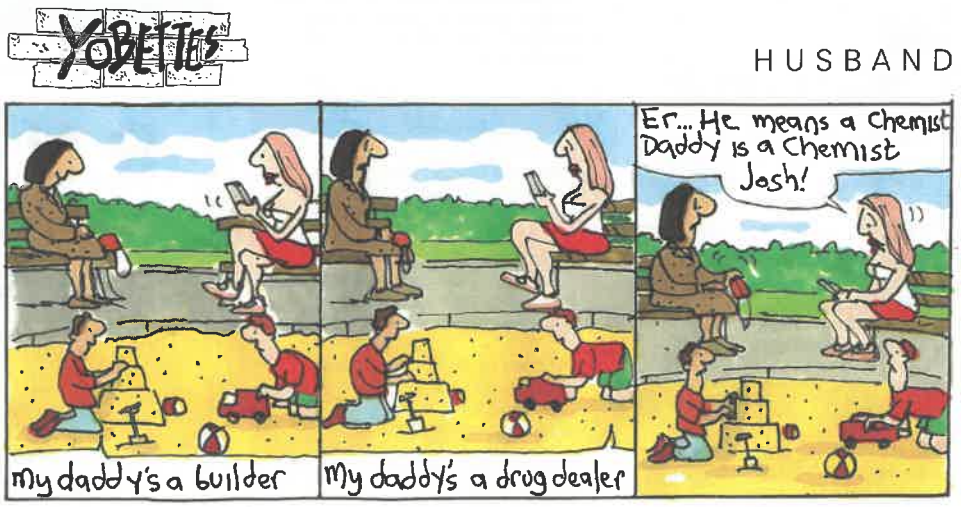
DOWN

2 Bit of a joke model pursuing Robin (7)
3 Planned on making street lowlife, say, in charge (9)
4 Suffer: "No space for hot dog!" (5)
5 Sailors ain't about to refrain from sex? (7)
6 Minister, who (had Sunak been one) would not be back in government? (9)
7 US city scam (5)
8 Nasty wind brought about by rent trouble (7)
14 High octane lad, not to be relied on (9)
16 Fire former royal son and demand payment! (9)
18 Strip, sticking one ball in box (7)
19 Spar perhaps with Digger, then a Labour leader (7)
21 Couch potatoes right to be put in sale of rubbish? (7)
23 Slap balls with end of paddle? Mistake! (5)
25 Impatient Conservative right wing's unbridled rage (5)

Crossword 741 winner: SEAN O'NEILL

ACROSS: 1 Macron 4 Grappled 10 Singalong 11/22 Phone hacking 12/20 Mealy-mouthed 13 Full-dress 14 Disbelief 17 Egypt 19 Admin 21 Triumphal 23 Stumbling 25 Locum 26 Mahdi 27 Admission 28 Pedigree 29 Craggy.

DOWN: 1 Mass media 2 Canvass 3 Ovary 5 Regal 6 Pipe dream 7 Loosely 8 Dress 9 Conflict 15 Ennobling 16 Fair game 18 Talk money 23 Sum up 24 Image 25 Loser.



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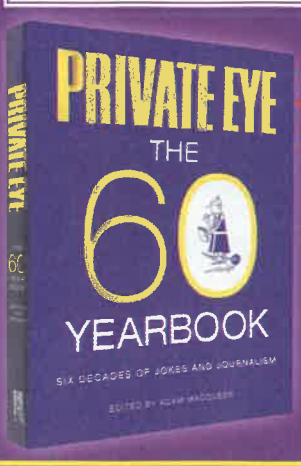

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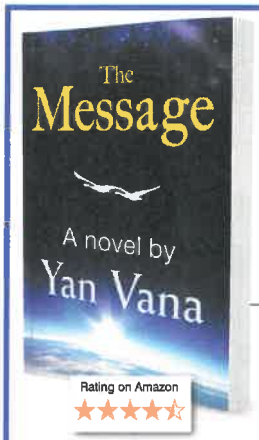

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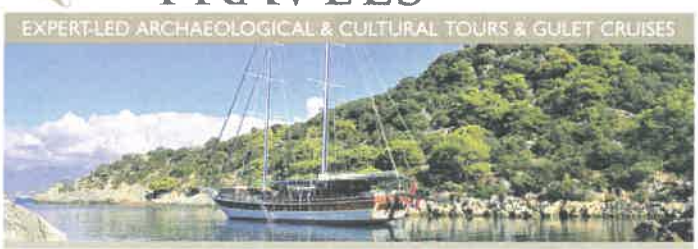

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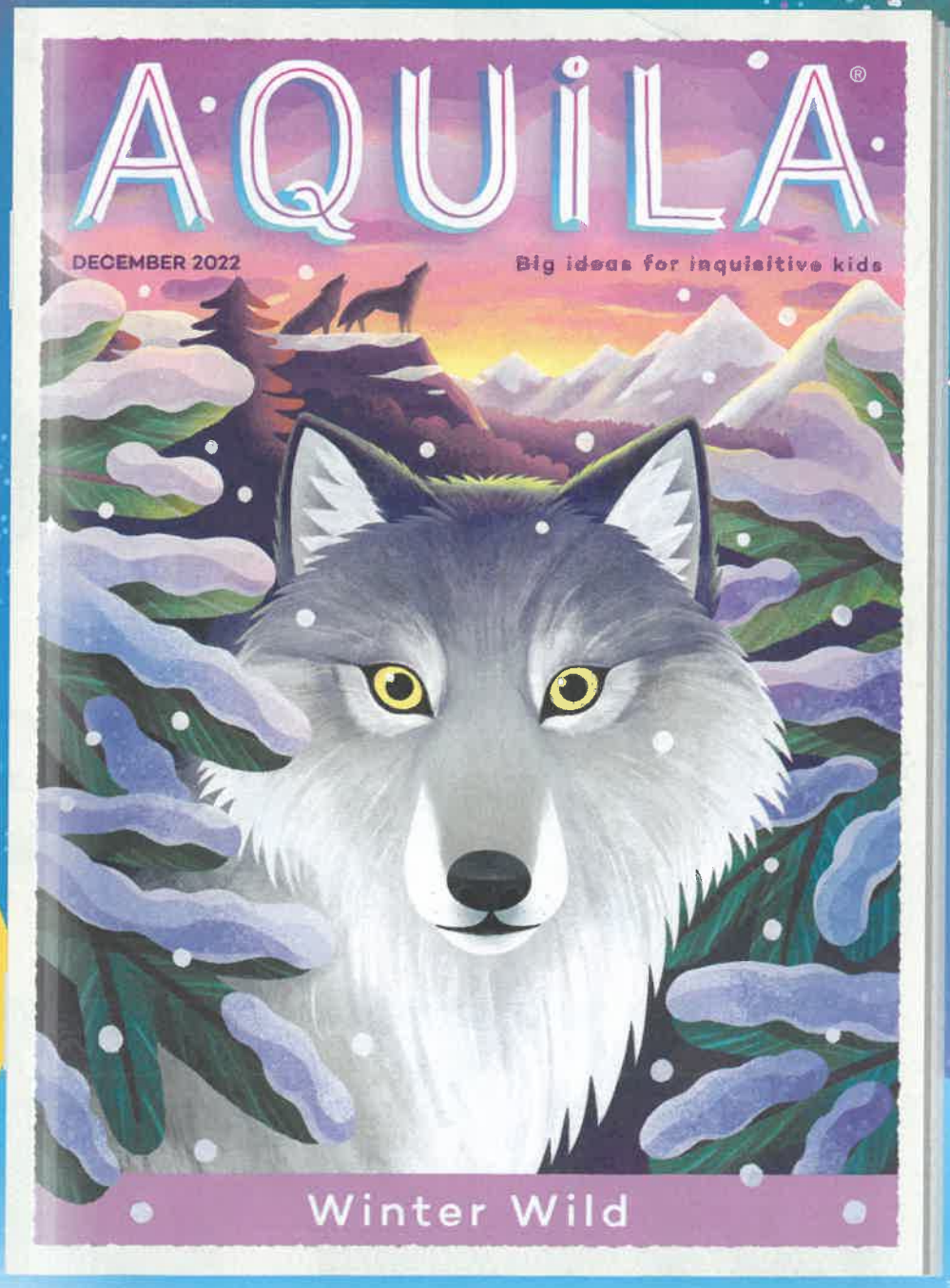

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